



Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority

Meeting and date: Extraordinary Fire Authority, 24 October 2023

Report title: His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) – Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service (BFRS) Inspection Report 2023

Lead Member: Cllr Simon Rouse, Chairman

Report sponsor: Interim Chief Fire Officer, Mick Osborne

Author and contact: Anne-Marie Carter, Head of Technology, Transformation and PMO – Acarter@bucksfire.gov.uk

Action: For Noting and Approval

Recommendations:

- 1) That the Authority note the BFRS HMICFRS 2023 inspection report (Appendix 1)
- 2) That the Interim CFO be delegated to prepare and publish an Action Plan on behalf of the Authority in consultation with the Chairman and the Vice Chairman
- 3) That the Overview and Audit Committee be delegated the monitoring of progress of delivery against the Action Plan

Executive summary:

In July 2017, HMICFRS extended its remit to include inspections of England's fire and rescue service. They assess and report on the efficiency, effectiveness and people of the 44 fire and rescue services in England. [How we inspect fire and rescue services - His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services \(justiceinspectors.gov.uk\)](https://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk)

HMICFRS last inspected Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service (BFRS) in June 2021. And in December 2021, published BFRS's inspection report with HMICFRS findings on the service's effectiveness and efficiency and how well it looks after its people.

This inspection is the third assessment and the service has been measured against the same 11 areas and given a grade for each.

The following changes have been made for round 3:

- No separate grades for effectiveness, efficiency and people as HMICFRS did previously.
- Expanded the previous four-tier system of graded judgments to five.

HMICFRS state “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.” Source: HMICFRS.gov.uk

This report sets out HMICFRS inspection findings for Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service following the inspection during May and June 2023

HMICFRS published the BFRS Round 3 report on 19 October 2023. The report is attached as Appendix 1.

The Service received the following judgements:

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

Depending upon the severity of their findings, HMICFRS may provide suggested areas for improvement, or causes of concern and recommendations. A recommendation will always accompany a cause of concern. The Fire and Rescue Service National Framework for England requires fire and rescue services to give due regard to HMICFRS reports and recommendations. Where recommendations are made, the receiving Service is required to prepare, update and regularly publish an action plan detailing how such recommendations are actioned.

The latest report for this Service identifies three causes of concern, accompanied by 10 recommendations, and 26 areas for improvement. These can be found in a summary document in Appendix 2.

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.

Although much of the work to address the causes of concern is included in other plans including the Prevention Improvement plan and the Equality, diversity, and inclusion objectives for 2020-2025 the Service is updating the HMICFRS Action plan.

The action plan will be managed as part of the Portfolio Management Office (PMO), with regular reporting through internal governance structures. It is proposed that the Authority be kept informed of progress in delivering against the HMICFRS Action Plan via regular reporting to both the Overview and Audit Committee and full Authority.

Furthermore, as per requirements set out in the report covering letter to the Chairman and Chief Fire Officer on 17 October 2023, (attached as Appendix 3) a copy of the action plan will also be sent to HMI Roy Wilsher within 28 days of the report publication; no later than 15 November 2023.

This Service has built an effective relationship with HMICFRS, which it intends to maintain. Officers are due to meet HMICFRS Service Liaison Lead on 10 November 2023 to update progress against these recommendations.

Financial implications: The prioritisation of improvements to address the specific recommendations raised within the causes of concern may introduce additional financial implications, either through reprioritisation of other projects, or through new workstreams.

Consideration will be given to ensure associated costs, both direct and indirect, are fully understood and managed effectively.

Risk management: There remains reputational corporate risks to the organisation. The Service continues to take steps to mitigate this through having extensive internal and external audits of a number of areas of the Service, in addition to the HMICFRS inspections. The internal audit plan for 23/24 can be found here: [Internal Audit Report – Internal Audit Strategy and Annual Internal](#)

Legal implications: The current Fire and Rescue Service National Framework issued under section 21 of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, to which the Authority must have regard when carrying out its functions, states as follows at paragraph 7.5:

‘Fire and rescue authorities must give due regard to reports and recommendations made by HMICFRS and – if recommendations are made – prepare, update and regularly publish an action plan detailing how the recommendations are being actioned. If the fire and rescue authority does not propose to undertake any action as a result of a recommendation, reasons for this should be given.’

It continues: ‘When forming an action plan, the fire and rescue authority could seek advice and support from other organisations, for example, the National Fire Chiefs Council and the Local Government Association’.

Privacy and security implications:

No privacy or security implications have been identified that are directly associated with this report or its appendices.

The report and its appendices are not protectively marked.

Duty to collaborate:

Each fire and rescue service is inspected individually. However, the latest report includes findings relating to the Service’s ability to collaborate effectively with partners. The report states: “We were pleased to see the service meets its statutory duty to collaborate. It continues to consider opportunities to collaborate with other emergency responders.”

Health and safety implications:

The HMICFRS report states:

- The service provides good well-being provisions to its workforce, but work-related stress is not being fully addressed
- The service has a positive health and safety culture

The areas for improvement relating to working hours and secondary contracts will feed into the Health, safety and wellbeing group.

Environmental implications:

The HMICFRS report states:

“The service didn’t identify all the potential climate impacts and mitigation measures required in its 2020–2025 public safety plan. This is what it calls its integrated risk management plan. It has now recognised that it needs a different range of equipment to be ready to respond to this risk both now and in the future.”

Equality, diversity, and inclusion implications:

The Service has been judged as ‘requires improvement’ in the area relating to Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity, along with a cause of concern and four recommendations relating to equality, diversity and inclusion. All the findings from the HMICFRS round three inspection report will be fully considered and prioritised to ensure continual improvement is established and maintained.

The Authority’s equality, diversity, and inclusion objectives 2020-2025 – year 3 progress was presented to the Fire Authority on 14 June 2023.

Consultation and communication:

Specific areas identified for Service improvement are being captured in relevant plans and will be reported on in line with the recommendations.

Next steps -

- Report published on BFRS website

Background papers:

HMICFRS BFRS Home Page: [Buckinghamshire - His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services \(justiceinspectorates.gov.uk\)](https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/buckinghamshire-fire-and-rescue-service/)

16 February 2022 – Fire Authority: Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) – Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service (BFRS) Inspection Report 2021

<https://bucksfire.gov.uk/documents/2022/02/fa-item-10-16022022.pdf/>

16 March 2022 – Overview and Audit Committee: Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) –Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service (BFRS) Improvement Plan Update

<https://bucksfire.gov.uk/documents/2022/03/oa-item-14-160322.pdf/>

20 January 2023 - State of Fire and Rescue: The Annual Assessment of Fire and Rescue Services in England 2022

[State of Fire and Rescue: The Annual Assessment of Fire and Rescue Services in England 2022 - HMICFRS](#)

14 June 2023 – Fire Authority – Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Objectives 2020-2025 – Year three update

[fire-authority-annual-meeting-item-16-equality-diversity-and-inclusion-objectives-2020-2025-year-three-update.pdf/](#)

Appendix	Title	Protective Marking
1	Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service report 2023-25	N/A
2	BFRS HMICFRS Round 3: Summary of Findings	
3	HMI Roy Wilsher to BFRS	

Fire & Rescue Service 2023–25

Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service

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Changes to this round of inspection

We last inspected Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service in June 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 Buckinghamshire 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 Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service has performed in 11 areas. We have made the following graded judgments:

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

It was a pleasure to revisit Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service. HM Inspector Matt Parr CB was responsible for most of the inspection, although I have taken over for the completion of this report. I am grateful for the positive and constructive way in which the service worked with our inspection staff.

I have concerns about the performance of Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service in keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks. Although there are some positives in protection, I have serious concerns about the way protection operates. In view of these findings, I have been in contact with the chief fire officer as I don't underestimate how much improvement is needed.

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.

The principal findings from our assessments of the service since its last inspection are as follows:

- The service hasn't done enough since its last inspection to address the areas for improvement in protection and to provide clear direction to make sure that its teams can prioritise work according to risk. It doesn't have a clear plan to provide fire safety audits in its highest-risk buildings and make sure that risk to the public is mitigated.
- The service is overly reliant on its neighbouring fire and rescue services to provide a response to incidents in its area. It is struggling to have available all the resources it may need and to meet its public safety plan. This means that it isn't meeting its own response standard and providing the best possible service that it can to the public.
- The service's staff are frustrated by a lack of clear direction and prioritisation from their senior leaders. Many staff feel overwhelmed by the increasing workloads and constant turnover of staff. We heard that staff want things to change.

We recognise that the service has faced challenges over recent years, and there is a clear commitment from staff in the service to improve. Given the nature of some of the problems we have identified, we will keep in close contact with the service to monitor its progress in addressing areas for improvement, causes of concern and associated recommendations.



Roy Wilsher

HM Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Service in numbers



Profile

	Buckinghamshire	England
Area Square miles	723	50,370
Population (thousands) 30 June 2021	843	56,536
Population density Thousands per square mile	1.2	1.1



Cost

Funding Year ending 31 March 2022	£28.9m	£2.5bn
Expenditure per population Year ending 31 March 2022	£35.51	£41.88

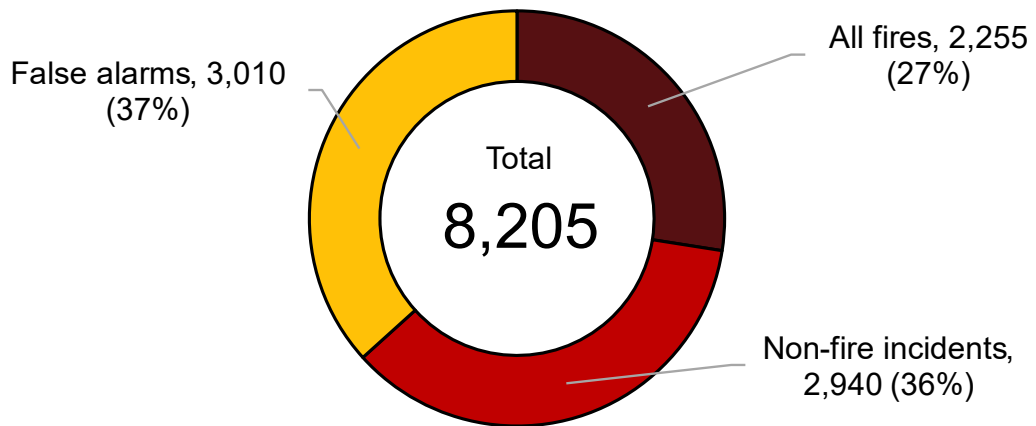


Response

Incidents attended per 1,000 population Year ending 30 September 2022	9.7	11.0
Home fire safety checks carried out by fire and rescue service per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2022	1.9	7.7
Fire safety audits per 100 known premises Year ending 31 March 2022	1.4	2.0
Availability of wholetime pumps Year ending 31 March 2022	94.6%	



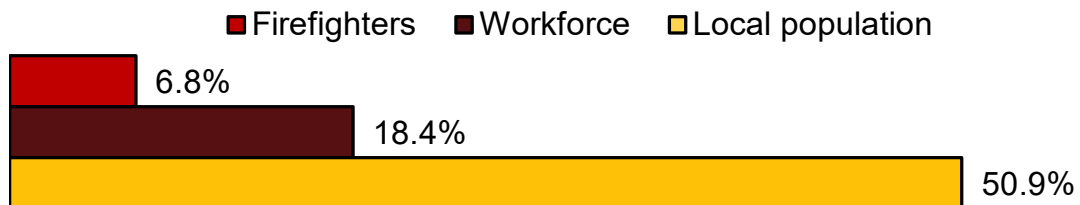
Incidents attended in the year to 30 September 2022



Workforce

	Buckinghamshire	England
Five-year change in total workforce 2017 to 2022	2.2%	0.2%
Number of firefighters per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2022	0.47	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

Requires improvement

Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement 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.

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure it is informed by a comprehensive understanding of current and future risk. It should use a wide range of data to build the risk profile and use operational data to test that the risk profile is up to date.

The service, through regular engagement with its local community, needs to build a more comprehensive profile of risk in its service area.

The service should make sure that the aims and objectives of prevention, protection and response activity are clearly outlined in its integrated risk management plan.

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 doesn't consider all the risks it faces

The service hasn't fully assessed the risks it faces as part of its community risk management planning process. When assessing risk, it only considers limited information from internal and external sources, which doesn't enable it to build a comprehensive risk profile. For example, the service didn't identify all the potential climate impacts and mitigation measures required in its 2020–2025 public safety plan. This is what it calls its [integrated risk management plan](#). It has now recognised that it needs a different range of equipment to be ready to respond to this risk both now and in the future.

The service has held limited consultations with its communities and other relevant parties to inform the annual update and priorities of its public safety plan. For example, it hasn't consulted with the public since 2019 when it last developed its public safety plan. But, in 2022, the service took an opportunity to consult with a specific part of its community in High Wycombe. The outcome of this work is yet to be evaluated, and we look forward to seeing how the service uses what it has learned.

While the service has recognised the need to bring forward its planning process, so far it has consulted with only one section of the community. It doesn't understand what others in different parts of the community might need, so it still needs to build a more comprehensive risk profile. It hasn't addressed this or the two other areas for improvement for risk management identified in our 2021 report.

The service is unclear about how it will manage all the risks it faces

The service has recognised the need to bring forward the development of its next risk management plan and has begun to identify key milestones and data sources for its development. It plans to call its next public safety plan for 2025–2030 a community integrated risk management plan.

The service's public safety plan doesn't fully identify the risks to the public or how it will address these. For example, the service's response and prevention plans focus on addressing the risks presented by an ageing population. But there is no clear identification of what the current and future risks for protection are.

It isn't clear from the public safety plan how the service intends to use its prevention, protection and response resources to mitigate or reduce the risk and threats to its community, both now and in the future. It has planned well for the development of the new high-speed railway and the risks of attending incidents for this infrastructure project. But it hasn't provided appropriate equipment and worked to reduce the risk of wildfires effectively. It hasn't been able to implement its [intelligence](#)-led approach for protection fully and hasn't maintained an effective means of liaising with local businesses.

While the service has done some positive work to reduce risk, it is still unclear how all its core functions of prevention, protection and response will work together effectively to further reduce risk. Therefore, the area for improvement identified in 2021 remains.

The service gathers, maintains and shares a range of risk information

The service routinely collects and updates the information it has about the highest-risk buildings and threats it has identified that could harm its firefighters. This includes site-specific risk information to identify the threats to firefighters when attending an incident such as that from combustible cladding.

We sampled a broad range of the risk information the service collects, including that for high-rise residential buildings, hospitals and commercial premises. This identified evacuation procedures and included detailed technical drawings and photographs.

This information is available for the service's response staff. Staff at the locations we visited, including firefighters and emergency control room staff, were able to show us that they can access, use and share risk information quickly. But some of the information we reviewed in the control room was inaccurate or out of date. The service also needs to do more so that staff in prevention and protection are aware of this information when carrying out their work. This would help the core functions in the service to be more effective in identifying and reducing more risk.

The service builds some understanding of risk from operational activity

The service records and communicates learning from operational activity. It also routinely updates its site-specific [risk assessments](#) and uses feedback from local and national operational activities to inform its procedures. It is introducing new welfare equipment following feedback from the incidents in the heatwave of July 2022.

But we found that the service wasn't as quick as it could be at acting on all that it learns from feedback from either local or national operational activity. Although the learning is collated in one central database, reoccurring themes are going without action, and some of the points still to action date back to 2021.

While the service has recognised and planned well for some risks, the area for improvement identified in 2021 remains.

Preventing fires and other risks

Requires improvement

Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement 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

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.

Recommendations

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; and
- its systems and processes for dealing with referrals from individuals and partner agencies effectively manage and prioritise those referrals with the highest identified risk.

Area for improvement

The service should evaluate its prevention work so that it understands the benefits better.

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 revised its prevention strategy

The service's prevention strategy is now clearly linked to the ageing population risk it has identified in its public safety plan. It is making sure that those aged over 80 in the local population, who it has identified as most vulnerable to fire, are being supported through [home fire safety checks](#) (what it calls fire and wellness visits). The service has made good progress against the recommendation in our previous report to revise its prevention strategy so that it clearly prioritises some of the people most at risk of fire and other emergencies. It is giving more focus and direction to specialist teams, which was an issue in our 2021 inspection.

The service's prevention and response teams work well together to share information about [vulnerable people](#). Both prevention and response teams now have better direction and oversight of their productivity since our last inspection. The service has made progress in increasing the number of fire and wellness visits it carries out in its area using its prevention and response staff. It told us that it completed 2,403 fire and wellness visits in 2022/23. Of this number, 97 percent were for those identified as being more vulnerable to fire, including:

- at least one person over the age of 65 but no one in the household with disabilities;
- at least one person aged over 65 and one person in the household with disabilities (can be the same person); and
- everyone under the age of 65 but one person in the household with disabilities.

Home Office data shows that the service carried out 1,610 visits in 2021/22. This was equivalent to 1.9 visits per 1,000 population, whereas the England rate was 7.8 visits per 1,000 population. The service has made enough progress against the area for improvement identified in our last inspection to understand the reasons for its decreasing number of prevention visits. This area for improvement is now closed.

The service could still do more to make sure it is defining and prioritising risks

The service has drafted a risk-based approach to clearly prioritise its prevention activity towards people most at risk from fire and other emergencies. And it is positive that those over 80 or living in high-rise accommodation are now a priority for the service.

But the service still needs to make sure that this prioritisation methodology is fully implemented. We found that the service was still offering fire and wellness visits on a first-come, first-served basis rather than a highest-risk basis. We were told that the service currently has a higher-than-expected backlog of referrals waiting to be visited by its staff. This means that those who may be at higher risk of fire may not be visited as a priority.

Clearly defining all those who are more vulnerable to fire and other risks, as well as assuring that these higher-risk visits are prioritised, were recommendations in the cause of concern from our last inspection. As the service has only defined and targeted the risks to those who are over 80 or live in high-rise accommodation, the cause of concern and the two recommendations remain.

Staff are good at completing fire and wellness visits for older people

Staff told us they have the right skills and confidence to make fire and wellness visits. These visits cover an appropriate range of hazards that can put older vulnerable people at greater risk from fire and other emergencies. For example, the service can make referrals for those who might be more at risk of falling.

The service uses local information and data to target its prevention activity at vulnerable individuals and groups. Local station plans are now helping firefighters offer fire and wellness visits to people over 80. But this information isn't helping to identify and provide support to others who may be at risk of fire or have other safety concerns and who are under 65.

The service is good at responding to safeguarding concerns

Staff we interviewed told us about occasions when they had identified [safeguarding](#) problems. They told us they feel confident and trained to act appropriately and promptly. Training in identifying safeguarding concerns is completed through the service's e-learning platform. The service is also still well connected to local safeguarding boards and multi-agency panels.

The service works well with others to prevent fires and other incidents

The service works with a wide range of other organisations to prevent fires and other emergencies. These include the [Safety Centre](#), Thames Valley Police, South Central Ambulance Service, housing associations, other health partners and local councils.

We found evidence that the service refers people at risk to other organisations that may better meet their needs. These organisations include social services and those that offer help to people with sensory needs. In 2021/22, the service made 267 referrals to other agencies, which is an increase on the previous year when only 23 referrals were made.

Arrangements are also in place to receive referrals from others. In 2021/22, 855 referrals were received from other organisations that had identified those people most vulnerable to fire. The service is working with these organisations to make sure that they understand how to make these referrals through a programme called 'fire-sense'.

In addition to carrying out fire and wellness visits, the service carries out a range of other interventions, which it adapts to the level of risk in its communities. For example, it worked with the local council to support refugees moving into the area. And it has commissioned the education of children, young people and adults in fire, road and water safety at the Safety Centre.

The service has arrangements to tackle 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. Some of the service's new prevention staff have been trained, and continue to be trained, in providing education and safety information for families.

When appropriate, the service routinely shares information with relevant organisations to support the prosecution of arsonists. It has an agreement with Thames Valley Police to share data via an online secure platform.

The service could do more to change its prevention activity using evaluation

The service has completed phase one of its evaluation to measure how effective its activity is and to make sure that all sections of its communities get appropriate access to the prevention services that meet their needs. This has resulted in a prevention improvement plan that is to be worked on throughout 2024 and 2025.

Prevention activities take account of feedback from the public and other parts of the service. The service has carried out a prevention customer engagement evaluation with people who have had fire and wellness visits. The results of this will help the service focus its internal training.

The service isn't using all opportunities to gather feedback and evaluation to fully inform its planning assumptions and quickly adapt its provision for the community. It has focused only on what its own data has identified as an issue. It hasn't considered what different parts of the community need or evaluated what activity will work to address this need. Its campaign activity is limited to overall fire, road and water safety messaging and isn't yet targeting groups and safety messages using evaluation and evidence. As a result, the service is missing opportunities to improve its prevention work for the public.

The service's lack of technology and capacity to follow up on outward referrals sent to other organisations are barriers to more information being collected. While the service has made some progress and has a prevention improvement plan in place, the area for improvement identified in 2021 remains.

Protecting the public through fire regulation

Inadequate

Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service is inadequate 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.

Cause of concern

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.

Recommendation

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.

Areas for improvement

The service should review its response to false alarms to ensure that protection and operational resources are used effectively.

The service should ensure that its staff have the confidence to use the full range of enforcement powers.

The service should make sure that it plans its work with local businesses and large organisations to share information and expectations on how they can comply with fire safety regulations.

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 protection strategy isn't providing enough direction

The service's protection strategy isn't clearly linked to the risks it has identified in its public safety plan. The strategy is dated 2018–2023, and there has been no review with the introduction of a new risk-based inspection programme. And it isn't clear from the service's strategy what level of activity it aims to take.

In the year ending 31 March 2022, the service completed 336 fire safety audits in total. This equates to 1.4 fire safety audits per 100 known premises, compared with the England rate of 2 per 100 known premises.

The service doesn't make it clear how it evaluates the benefit its protection activity gives the public. Home Office data shows that, in the year to 31 March 2022, 81.3 percent of its fire safety audits resulted in a satisfactory outcome. And the service's performance report indicates that fires in commercial premises increased in the year 2022/23.

Protection work generally happens in isolation rather than across all the service's teams. We found that the service's firefighters only identified safety concerns about a premise to the protection team when they have responded to an incident or completed a site-specific risk visit. The prevention team's focus on high-rise residential buildings isn't being effectively co-ordinated with the work of the protection team. Staff aren't aware of when fire safety audits at high-rise buildings are due to take place. This means that information provided to residents during a fire and wellness visit may not have been the most up to date.

Activity isn't aligned with risk

The service has a good basis for its risk-based inspection programme, but it isn't being used to direct activity. The service's protection staff aren't confident that the work they are completing is for the highest risks. They are also unsure at what frequency fire safety audits should be completed. We were told that sleeping risk (premises where people sleep, except for single private dwellings) is currently a priority for the service. But in 2021/22, 34.8 percent of premises inspected by the service had no apparent associated sleeping risks. In addition, in 2022 the service introduced new ways to identify high-risk premises but staff are unclear about what these include.

We found that the service wasn't consistently auditing the buildings it has targeted in the time frames it has set. In the year ending 31 March 2022, the service identified 1,458 high-risk premises in its area but completed only 336 high-risk fire safety audits. And, in the year ending 31 March 2021, when the service identified 910 high-risk premises, only 303 high-risk audits were completed.

We were told that high-risk premises should be visited each year and that all high risks should be seen within three years. But staff don't have a consistent target for fire safety audits, and there is limited understanding of why tasks are allocated.

Fire safety audit records are of a good quality

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; or
- at high-rise, high-risk buildings.

The audits we reviewed were completed to a high standard, mostly consistent and in line with the service's policies. The service makes relevant information from its audits available to operational teams and control room operators via email notifications.

The service should quality assure fire safety audits to maintain good standards

The service carries out limited quality assurance of its protection activity. There is no quality assurance procedure, and the service's quality assurance form is unused. Some of the audits reviewed had inconsistent outcomes recorded. This was an area for improvement in our last inspection and is now a recommendation for the cause of concern identified in this inspection.

The service doesn't have good evaluation tools in place to measure how effective it is or to make sure that all sections of its communities get appropriate access to protection services that meet their needs.

The service takes enforcement action when needed, but confidence is reducing

The service uses some of its enforcement powers and, when appropriate, it has acted to prosecute those who don't comply with fire safety regulations. Managers assure the decision-making processes in cases where enforcement action may be needed, or the service seeks advice from the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#). But staff told us that recent changes in the team reduce their confidence in using the full range of enforcement powers to which the service has access.

Home Office data shows that, in the year ending 31 March 2022, the service issued 82 informal notifications, 5 enforcement notices and 2 prohibition notices. The service hasn't undertaken any prosecution of offences, and it hasn't provided any data about alteration notices for the year ending 31 March 2022. It completed two prosecutions in the five years from 2017/18 to 2021/22.

The service's protection team is well trained and resourced

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. The service has 18 specialist protection staff in total. It also has access to a qualified fire safety engineer to provide guidance and support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

While this is a positive for the service, in our last inspection, we gave an area for improvement that required the service to increase the amount of activity this well-resourced team carries out. This will now be a recommendation in the cause for concern identified during this inspection.

The service is able to adapt 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 the end of 2021, it had completed work to audit all high-rise premises with aluminium composite material. However, it is unsure how these arrangements will affect its other protection activity from 2023.

The Fire Safety Regulations 2022 introduced a range of duties for the managers of tall buildings. These included a requirement to give the fire and rescue service floor plans and to inform them of any substantial faults in essential firefighting equipment, such as firefighting lifts.

We found that the service had good arrangements in place to receive this information. When it doesn't receive the right information, it acts quickly. And it updates the risk information it gives its operational staff accordingly.

The service is working with others when necessary

The service works with other enforcement agencies to regulate fire safety, but it does so inconsistently. It doesn't routinely exchange risk information with them. It has good links with the local council safety regulation teams, but there is a mixed approach to working with the Health and Safety Executive.

The service responds well to building consultations and licencing requests

The service continues to respond to all building consultations in good time. This means that it consistently meets its statutory responsibility to comment on fire safety arrangements at new and altered buildings. In the year ending 31 March 2022, the service responded to 93.7 percent of building consultations and 95.8 percent of licencing consultations within the required time frame.

The service has reduced its promotion of fire safety legislation to businesses

The service could do more to work with local businesses and other organisations to promote compliance with fire safety legislation. It had dedicated business safety adviser posts, but these are currently unfilled. It also has partnerships with a range of [primary authority schemes](#), and this is the responsibility of one person.

The service's website includes good information about business fire safety. Some work is done to promote access to this, but it isn't well co-ordinated or evaluated to understand the benefit. While the service has some means to promote fire safety legislation, the area for improvement identified in our last inspection is now a recommendation in the cause of concern identified in this inspection.

The service isn't taking action to reduce the burden of false alarms

The service is taking only limited action to reduce the number of false alarms that it responds to. It hasn't reviewed its policy since our last inspection and continues to respond to all false alarm calls it receives.

In the year ending 31 March 2022, the service attended 2,961 false alarms. This is 39.5 percent of all its incidents, and this has been a consistent figure since 2016. The service has a slightly lower figure compared with the national rate for false alarms of 39.8 percent in 2021/22. Of the fire false alarms, 79.6 percent were due to faulty apparatus. This means that engines may not be available to respond to genuine 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.

The service has made no progress in addressing the area for improvement identified in 2021. Therefore, the area for improvement remains.

Responding to fires and other emergencies

Requires improvement

Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement 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.

Areas for improvement

The service should assure itself that it understands what resources it reasonably requires to meet its foreseeable risk; it should make sure that all its fire engines can be sufficiently resourced, if required.

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

The service should make sure that it has an effective system for sharing and applying the learning from operational incidents.

The service should make sure that it consistently gives relevant information to the public to help keep them safe during and after all incidents.

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 struggles to resource all its fire engines

The service's response strategy is linked to the risks it has identified in its public safety plan. Some of its fire engines and response staff, as well as its working patterns, are designed and located to help the service respond flexibly to fires and other emergencies with the appropriate resources. For example, the service's specialist response vehicles (including its aerial appliance for high-rise incidents and water rescue boats for flooding and water-related incidents) and its urban search and rescue unit are in the right locations to respond to these infrequent but high-impact events.

But the service can't always explain the rationale for the resourcing at some of its fire stations among its response staff and within its working patterns. For example, it has reviewed the conditions generated by the heatwave of July 2022 and recognised the need to update and increase the number of vehicles that can go off-road. Through its ongoing review work, it has also recognised that its [on-call](#) fire engines have very limited use. This is due to its continued struggle to recruit on-call firefighters.

Services work across the Thames Valley and with other neighbouring services to make sure that incidents are responded to in the timeliest way. Borderless mobilising and sending the nearest fire engine to an incident is a positive and supportive approach. This means that the service may send its fire engines to incidents in neighbouring services or receive a response to incidents in its area from another fire service. But the service has recognised that, in 2022/23, almost 30 percent of incidents in its area received a response from a neighbouring service. We aren't confident that the increased reliance on other services is sustainable. Therefore, the area for improvement identified in 2021 remains.

The service isn't meeting its own response standards but does attend incidents within a reasonable time frame

There are no national response standards of performance for the public. But the service has set out its own response standards in its public safety plan. It aims to have an average response time that is a maximum of ten seconds more than the average response time of the previous five-year period. We have previously reported that the service's approach to reporting response times means that its response time could get worse, but it would still meet its own standard.

Home Office data shows that, in the year ending 31 March 2022, the service's response time to [primary fires](#) was 9 minutes and 27 seconds, which is faster than the average for significantly rural services. The service told us that the average response time to all incidents was 8 minutes 46 seconds compared with the service's previous 5-year average of 8 minutes and 28 seconds. This exceeds its maximum of ten seconds more than its five-year average, and the service isn't meeting the response standard it has set. It is aware of this decline but doesn't have a plan to change this.

The service has a decreasing number of fire engines available

To support its response strategy, the service aims to have 12 fire engines immediately available on all occasions. It also aims to have an additional three fire engines available on an on-call turnout of ten minutes.

The service doesn't always meet its standards. We have reported in previous years that it maintains 12 immediately-available fire engines, but this wasn't the case in 2022/23. The service reports that in some months during that period, fewer than ten fire engines were immediately available. And in 2021/22, data provided from our data collection shows that overall [wholetime](#) availability was 94.6 percent.

The service has good command of incidents

The service has trained incident commanders who are assessed regularly and properly. It has detailed records for the assessments, which are scheduled and completed at the [Fire Service College](#). This helps the service to safely, assertively and effectively manage the whole range of incidents it could face, from small and routine ones to complex multi-agency incidents.

As part of our inspection, we interviewed incident commanders from across the service. They are familiar with risk assessing, decision-making and recording information at incidents in line with national best practice, as well as the [Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles \(JESIP\)](#).

The service works well with Thames Valley Fire Control Service

We were pleased to see that Thames Valley Fire Control Service staff are still invited into the services command, training, exercise, debrief and assurance activity. There isn't always the capacity for control staff to accept the invitation but, when possible, they do so. Their feedback is welcomed, and staff work positively with the service to make sure that incidents are quickly resolved.

The service should make sure that there is a consistent way to access risk information

We sampled a range of risk information in the service's central database, on fire engine [mobile data terminals](#) and from [fire control](#), including the information in place for firefighters responding to incidents at high-risk, high-rise buildings.

The information we reviewed wasn't always up to date or detailed. For example, the same record in fire control had out-of-date information compared with that on the central database. And staff can't always easily access information on mobile data terminals if these are removed from the mounting points in fire engines. This means that staff have to download different versions onto different devices or take photographs to access information away from fire engines. This hasn't always been completed with input from the service's prevention, protection and response functions when appropriate.

The service has a good process for gathering operational performance information

As part of the inspection, we reviewed a range of emergency incidents and training events. These included a commercial property fire, a dwelling fire, the major incidents during the heatwave of July 2022 and an exercise for a basement fire.

The service has a good process in place to gather feedback from the staff involved in an operational incident through a mixture of [hot debriefs](#), structured debriefs, learning command reviews and feedback forms. As a result, it updates internal risk information after an incident. And it continues to exchange this information with appropriate organisations, such as the other Thames Valley fire and rescue services, South Central Ambulance Service and Thames Valley Police.

But we were disappointed to find that the service didn't consistently make sure that staff command incidents were in line with operational guidance. We found that incident commanders weren't as well supported and monitored between their assessments at the Fire Service College as they once were. We were told that junior officers are less inclined to progress through the incident command levels due to the lack of support they receive beyond the initial assessment.

The service doesn't always act on learning that it has, or should have, identified from incidents. This means that it isn't routinely improving its service to the public. We found that learning points on the service's tracker reoccurred after many incidents. Some of the learning still to be actioned dates back to September 2021.

The service is making good progress to align its procedures with national operational guidance

The service continues to work with the other Thames Valley fire services to develop operational information notes and align all their procedures with [national operational guidance](#). It has a plan to continue the alignment of remaining procedures, and each of the three Thames Valley services takes a proportion of the responsibility. The services meet regularly to monitor and track progress, which is recorded in a shared document.

The service isn't consistent at keeping the public informed during incidents

The service still doesn't have robust systems of its own in place to inform the public about ongoing incidents and help keep them safe during and after incidents that occur outside office hours. But, through collaborative working, it uses Thames Valley Police to warn and inform [local resilience forum \(LRF\)](#) partners to communicate information on its behalf. The service supports this forum as the deputy chair for the warn and inform LRF group. The service has also recently trained some of its senior and middle managers in media and communications to better support any out-of-hours requirements. We look forward to seeing the service progress its plans further, but the area for improvement identified in our last inspection remains.

Responding to major and multi-agency incidents

Adequate

Buckinghamshire 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).

Area 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.

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 prepared to respond to major and multi-agency incidents

The service has anticipated and considered most of the reasonably foreseeable major and multi-agency risks and threats it may face. These risks are listed in both local and national risk registers as part of its community risk management planning. For example, it has developed plans for responding to risks presented by the new high-speed railway project, HS2, and has completed exercises to test these plans. It also took part in a multi-agency exercise to test for a power outage scenario in March 2023.

The service is also familiar with the significant risks neighbouring fire and rescue services may face, and which it might reasonably be asked to respond to in an emergency. These include the racetrack at Silverstone and the risks of a high attendance event at this venue as well as Pinewood Studios, which is close to the border of many services. Firefighters have access to risk information from neighbouring services up to 10 km from its borders on both its mobile data terminals and via [Resilience Direct](#).

The service should address all the Grenfell Tower inquiry recommendations

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 have 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](#).

The service has developed several policies and procedures for safely managing this type of incident. But several of its high-rise buildings would require a response from neighbouring services, and not all of these follow the same operating procedures. This could lead to confusion and a delay in firefighting tactics.

Not all staff at all levels properly understand the policies and procedures the service has in place. We found that there was a good level of understanding among level two and three incident commanders, but junior incident commanders had limited knowledge.

The service has carried out a limited amount of realistic training and exercising at tall buildings. The last exercise arranged and led by the service was in July 2022. This training and exercising didn't include all staff groups that would be expected to respond to an incident of this nature.

At this type of incident, a fire and rescue service would receive a high volume of simultaneous fire calls. We found that the systems in place in the service weren't robust enough to receive and manage this volume of calls. Thames Valley Fire Control has a limited capacity and would quickly need to move to emergency [fall back](#) procedures.

We were disappointed to see that the trials the service had initiated at the time of our last inspection haven't led to the implementation of an electronic approach to sharing fire survival guidance information. This is due to different systems being used across the Thames Valley services. The service relies too heavily on paper-based systems that aren't sufficient in size to record all the information passed by radio to the incident ground. These systems are too open to operator error. This also means 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 services

The service supports other fire and rescue services responding to emergency incidents. The three Thames Valley fire and rescue services as well as the police have recently invested in a shared fire investigation team. The service is interoperable with these services and can form part of a multi-agency response.

The service has successfully deployed to other services and has used [national resilience assets](#) such as its urban search and rescue capability. And since the heatwave of July 2022, it has identified the need to have wildfire tactical advisers in the service.

The service takes part in cross-border exercising

The service continues to have a cross-border exercise plan with neighbouring fire and rescue services, helping them work together effectively to keep the public safe. The plan includes the risks of major events at which the service could foreseeably give support or ask for help from neighbouring services. We were encouraged to see that the service uses feedback from these exercises to inform risk information and service plans. A recent example includes an exercise to test arrangements to tackle a basement fire. Neighbouring services were invited and attended the event with the service.

The service's staff have a good understanding of JESIP

The incident commanders we interviewed have been trained in and are familiar with JESIP.

The service could give us strong evidence that it consistently follows these principles. This includes having a plan to carry out four multi-agency exercises per year and all incident commanders completing JESIP e-learning each year.

We sampled a range of debriefs that the service had carried out after multi-agency incidents and/or exercises. We were encouraged to find that the service was identifying any problems it had with applying JESIP and was taking appropriate, prompt action with other emergency services. The service recently highlighted the rising issue of lithium-ion battery fires through the JESIP learning subgroup of the LRF.

The service works well with other partner organisations in the Thames Valley

The service has good arrangements in place to respond to emergencies with partner organisations that make up the Thames Valley LRF. These arrangements include how the service will respond to marauding terrorist attacks.

The service is a valued partner and is represented by staff at all levels. It chairs the subgroup for warning and informing the public of serious incidents as well as the training and learning subgroup. The service takes part in regular training events with other members of the LRF and uses the learning to develop planning assumptions about responding to major and multi-agency incidents. All partner organisations were able to share learning from the heatwave of July 2022 and to consider early warning protocols.

The service uses national learning to update its procedures

The service makes sure that it knows about national operational updates from other fire 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.

Making best use of resources

Requires improvement

Buckinghamshire 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 £36.5 million. This is an 8.9 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 it sets out in its next integrated risk management plan.

The service should have effective measures in place to assure itself that its workforce is productive, that its time is used as efficiently and effectively as possible and in a more joined-up way to meet the priorities in its integrated risk management plan.

The service should make sure that 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 has a comprehensive financial plan

The service's financial position has improved considerably following a rise in the council tax precept and an increase in central government funding. Its comprehensive financial plans are built on sound scenarios and are now underpinned by more sustainable funding arrangements. The service has planned for the increases in inflation seen throughout 2022/23 and is able to show a balanced budget over the medium term due to its increased income.

The service has good financial controls that reduce the risk of misusing public money. It continues to hold in-year budget reviews to make sure that any underspend is directed where it could be better spent. And it carries out rigorous checks during its procurement processes.

The service needs to show a clear rationale for the allocation of resources

The service sometimes uses its resources well to manage risk. For example, its specialist fire engines are located at stations that provide the fastest response for specific types of incidents. But there remain weaknesses that need addressing. The service must still manage the daily allocation of fire engines using a significant amount of additional forward planning and resource. Although this approach provides the service with immediate flexibility in adjusting for daily demand, it is an ongoing struggle for the service to have all the resources available that it may need.

The service's financial and workforce plans, including allocating resources to prevention, protection and response, aren't consistent with the limited risks and priorities it has identified in its public safety plan. The rationale for why the service allocates the resources it does to its prevention and protection teams isn't clear. The service aims to increase the number of fire and wellness visits it carries out, but it has a high turnover of staff in its prevention team, which reduces its capacity to achieve these ambitious targets. Moreover, staff in protection have no targets to achieve and feel they aren't reaching their full capacity.

The service hasn't evaluated its mix of crewing and duty systems. It hasn't analysed its response cover and can't show that it deploys its fire engines and response staff to manage all risks efficiently. Some of its on-call fire engines are rarely used to respond to incidents. For example, between 1 April 2018 and 30 June 2022, data suggests that the fire engines at Stokenchurch, Brill, Chesham and Winslow were at incidents less than 0.5 percent of the time. These fire engines also had low availability. In 2021/22, the fire engine at Stokenchurch wasn't available, while the fire engine at Chesham was available less than 5.11 percent of each month (except in March 2022 when it increased to 15 percent). Staff told us that they have missed opportunities to respond with the nearest fire engine due to poor availability.

The service has identified that in 2022/23, it used neighbouring service resources to respond to 30 percent of the incidents in its area. It also told us that it will be reviewing its response cover as part of its next public safety plan. We look forward to seeing the outcomes of this work.

The service needs to do more to make sure that its workforce is productive

In our last inspection, one of the identified areas for improvement was that the service should have effective measures to assure itself that its workforce is productive and that its time is used as efficiently and effectively as possible to meet the limited priorities in its public safety plan.

The service's arrangements for managing performance have improved since our last inspection. It now has a clearer set of key performance indicators that are linked to its annual corporate plan and strategic priorities. These are reviewed by senior managers in monthly meetings. Despite the monitoring of performance, we found that there was insufficient management of performance across the service's core functions. Managers and staff in protection are unclear whether they have any performance targets to achieve and whether any reporting of their productivity is taking place. Staff were recently provided with targets to complete fire and wellness visits but feel they are unrealistic due to a complex process of receiving referrals and data updates.

The service doesn't yet fully understand how it uses its wholetime firefighters. It has trialled an approach to collect data on how firefighters spend their time across day and night shifts. The service already knows that it doesn't make the most of its capacity. For example, firefighters are often required to move between stations to maintain the service's emergency response needs, but this reduces their ability to contribute to other work activities, such as prevention and protection.

The service should still do more to make sure that its workforce is as productive as possible. This includes considering its ways of working and the communication of performance targets. Therefore, the area for improvement identified in 2021 remains.

The service relies too much on a form of voluntary overtime that it calls its 'bank shifts'. While this has reduced slightly since our last inspection, it is still required to cover gaps in daily staffing of fire engines because there is a substantial number of vacancies. The service plans to increase its firefighter establishment by the end of 2023 through several routes, including recruitment of new apprentices and transfers into the service from other neighbouring services and its own on-call firefighters. The service still needs to make sure that it has enough staff available to cover its daily demand and the infrequent high-impact events it may face.

The service has identified financial savings from collaborations, but it should do more to understand all the benefits of its collaborations

We were pleased to see that the service meets its statutory duty to collaborate. It continues to consider opportunities to collaborate with other emergency responders. For example, it has begun to purchase breathing apparatus jointly with the other Thames Valley fire and rescue services. Additional stations are now shared with Thames Valley Police and South Central Ambulance Service, which generates some savings across the emergency services. This was an area for improvement in the service's last inspection, which is now closed.

Although the service does collaborate with other emergency responders, its activity doesn't always align with the priorities identified in its safety plan. For example, the service has staff trained to co-respond to South Central Ambulance Service incidents. Some of this work increased with the pandemic. But staff feel that support to carry out this activity isn't provided by the service in the same way it once was. There are now only a few staff volunteering for this role. Staff told us about a traumatic incident where the only follow-up was given by South Central Ambulance Service rather than the service. That said, notable collaboration projects include:

- the Blue Light Hub, a shared premise with Thames Valley Police and South Central Ambulance Service;
- a joint upgrade for the service's wide area/local area network with the local council and NHS;
- a joint fire investigation team for all Thames Valley fire and rescue services and Thames Valley Police based at Marlow fire station; and
- educating children and young people through the Safety Centre, an education charity commissioned by the service.

Collaboration generates some savings. For example, the service has recently agreed to the recruitment of a joint data protection manager with the local council saving £20,000 annually. The purchase of fire engines collaboratively with the other Thames Valley fire and rescue services has saved the service approximately £200,000.

We aren't satisfied that the service uses the reviews and evaluation of collaboration activity to learn or change decisions. Although it carries out some monitoring during the development of collaboration projects, review and evaluation of all the benefits are limited. The service should do more to make sure that it has the capacity to evaluate its collaborations. This will help it understand what it could do more of to better benefit the public and generate further savings.

The service has tested its continuity arrangements

The service has 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. For example, four exercises to test the arrangements in the Thames Valley Fire Control Service in the event of industrial action were completed in 2022/23. But the service wouldn't be able to make many fire engines available to respond to an incident in the event of an extended period of industrial action. It would be reliant on support from the military, which may still result in the service not being able to provide its standard level of response.

The service continues to have sound financial management

There are regular reviews to consider all the service's expenditure, including its non-pay costs. And this scrutiny makes sure that the service gets value for money. For example, the service has identified that sharing premises at the Blue Light Hub will save it £166,000 in 2023/24. And, through the repayment of historic debt, it is avoiding paying £300,000 on the interest this debt would have incurred in future years. There are plans to save £580,000 in 2024/25 by vacating leasehold premises and reducing the amount of the revenue budget required to finance the capital programme.

The service has made savings and efficiencies, which have caused some disruption to its operational performance and the service it gives the public. It recognises that it needs to increase its establishment as it has had to make savings in its prevention, protection, response and support teams. This has reduced the capacity of its workforce. Staff reported still feeling under enormous pressure to manage a wide range of work areas due to these spending reductions. They reported needing additional firefighters and skilled staff in areas, including IT and project management, to provide the best service possible to the public.

The service is taking steps to make sure that it achieves efficiency gains through sound financial management and best working practices. It is doing this in important areas such as estates, fleet and procurement. For example, repair issues are monitored and assessed by the estates team to make sure that the best option to reduce ongoing costs is considered. And the fleet's use is monitored to look for opportunities for shared vehicles.

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

Requires improvement

Buckinghamshire 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 needs to assure itself that it is maximising opportunities to improve workforce productivity and develop future capacity through use of innovation, including the use of appropriate and up-to-date technology.

The service should assure itself that its IT systems are resilient, reliable, accurate and accessible.

The service should make sure it has the right skills and capacity to successfully manage change across the organisation.

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 developed a range of future spending scenarios

The service has a sound understanding of future financial challenges. It plans to mitigate its main or significant financial risks. Its hard work at both a national and local level to increase the council tax precept flexibility has been successful. It is planning for further future increases in inflation, pay rises and changes in pension contributions because it knows that these are its main future financial challenges.

The underpinning assumptions are relatively robust, realistic and prudent. They take account of the wider external environment and some scenario planning for future spending reductions. The service has worked hard at both a local and national level to maintain urban search and rescue funding until April 2024, and it has a plan to be able to maintain this beyond that period.

The service has identified in its efficiency plans that in 2022/23, it saved £61,000 on the cost of providing some of its training. It has also saved £187,000 through the joint procurement of breathing apparatus with the other Thames Valley fire and rescue services. It has plans to make further savings in 2023/24 and 2024/25 by moving teams from leasehold premises using more agile working arrangements.

Transformation in the service is slow

The service doesn't consider how changes in technology and future innovation may affect the risks it faces and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of its workforce. Some of its systems have created the need for teams to find their own workable solutions. This results in various forms, both paper and electronic, being used for the same task, which can be out of date or missing vital information. As the service has made limited progress against the area for improvement identified in our 2021 inspection, the area for improvement remains.

The service's system for managing protection and prevention information has failed in the past year, resulting in information being lost or needing to be revalidated. Firefighters in the service are having to find ways to work around the issues in accessing risk information because mobile data terminals can't be removed from fire engines. And the central system for managing risk information still hasn't been updated and will soon be out of date. The service should also assure itself that its IT systems are resilient, reliable, accurate and accessible.

The service has limited capacity and capability that it needs to achieve future change

The service has limited capacity and capability to bring about sustainable change, particularly in project management and IT. It has struggled to complete the work required to address many of the areas for improvement and cause of concern recommendations identified in our last inspection report.

The service recognised a gap in its ability to manage projects and introduced a project management office before our last inspection. This has provided it with a better structure to manage key change projects. But not all staff expected to manage a project receive project management training, and there are still too many competing priorities for staff to make informed and empowered decisions.

The service has struggled to recruit and retain staff with the IT skills it needs, and the IT team doesn't have the capacity to make the changes to systems internally that the service needs. The service has recognised a gap in the IT skills of its staff, but a recent business case to recruit an IT trainer wasn't successful and the service is considering different ways that it can address training needs. The service should make sure that it has the right skills and capacity in place to successfully manage change across the organisation.

Reserves are now increasing

We were encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since our last inspection. Due to its improved financial position, the service no longer faces the prospect of reduced reserves. It has a sensible and sustainable plan for using its reserves. It anticipates that reserves will be increased from the current £8 million to around £10 million by the end of March 2028. And it plans to use reserves to halve existing borrowing and therefore reduce the amount of interest the service must pay.

The service's fleet and estate are being improved

We were encouraged to see the improvements that the service has made since our last inspection. The service's fleet and estate strategies have been reviewed and, due to the improved financial position, longer-term plans for capital investments are being considered alongside the development of its next public safety plan. This was an area of improvement in our last inspection, which is now closed.

Both strategies exploit some opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness. For example, the service has fitted heating controls to make sure that buildings aren't heated when unoccupied, and lighting has been modified to reduce energy consumption by 30 percent. The service regularly reviews these strategies so that it can properly assess the effect any changes in fleet and estate provision or future innovation may have on risk. For example, it has recognised the need for smaller, lighter-weight vehicles to tackle wildfire risk. And it is anticipating how the introduction of a different vehicle will affect the service's fleet maintenance team.

The service still has limited opportunities to generate increased income

The service considers options for generating extra income, but its ambition and track record in securing extra income are limited. It continues to generate a small income from renting out drill towers to house mobile phone masts. But it has been unable to generate any income from the additional unused space it has at the Blue Light Hub.

Promoting the right values and culture

Requires improvement

Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement 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.

Areas for improvement

The service should assure itself that senior managers are visible and demonstrate service values through their behaviours.

The service should proactively monitor working hours (including overtime) to improve staff well-being.

The service should monitor secondary contracts to make sure staff don't work excessive 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's values are understood but not demonstrated by all staff

The service has well-defined values, which staff understand. It has aligned its values with the [Core Code of Ethics](#). Of those who responded to our staff survey, 96 percent (196 of 204) are aware of the service's statement of values, and 92.3 (181 of 196) agreed that their colleagues consistently model and maintain the service's values.

Staff are proud to work for the service and demonstrate commitment to putting the community at the heart of all they do. They are willing to challenge poor behaviours when they come across them and told us that there is an improving culture of respect in the service.

But the culture of the organisation doesn't always align with its values. Some behaviours we saw or were told about didn't meet the standards expected. Staff told us that they have to follow the service's 'chain of command' when raising an issue, even if this is a barrier to them. And some staff told us about inconsistent approaches to decision-making and a lack of visibility of the senior leadership team. During our inspection, we observed some staff who weren't always supportive of their colleagues and who lacked commitment to the service's value of improvement by not taking responsibility for their actions and performance.

Staff felt that senior leaders don't always act as positive role models. Of those who responded to our staff survey, we found that 91.3 percent (179 of 196) agreed that their line manager consistently models and maintains the service's values. But this number decreased for senior leaders in the service. In our survey, 71.9 percent (141 of 196) of respondents agreed that senior leaders consistently model and maintain the service's values. The service's own culture survey carried out in 2022 identified that staff didn't have confidence and trust in the senior leaders.

The service provides good well-being provisions to its workforce, but work-related stress isn't being fully addressed

The service continues to have a good range of well-being provisions in place to support the mental and physical health of staff following a period of absence. This includes access to:

- an occupational health team;
- physiotherapy;
- an employee assistance programme;
- a group of trained mental health first aiders; and
- a dedicated welfare officer who staff spoke very positively about.

Of those who responded to our staff survey, we found that 89.7 percent (183 of 204) agreed that they feel able to access services to support their mental well-being.

Staff reported that they understand and have confidence in the reactive well-being support processes available. They spoke positively about [critical incident](#) stress debriefs following traumatic incidents and the support provided for them to return to work following a period of absence. It is good to see that the service encourages the take-up of this aftercare.

The service could still do more to make sure that its managers communicate with all members of its workforce and understand what else they need to support their individual needs and prevent periods of absence. Of those who responded to our staff survey, 13.7 percent (28 of 204) have never had a conversation with their line manager about their personal well-being or work-related stress. And only 7.8 percent discussed their personal well-being or work-related stress annually with their line manager.

Some staff felt that ongoing work-related pressures and high workloads aren't being addressed or reduced to make sure that staff are able to do their jobs effectively. Of those who responded to our staff survey, 24 percent (49 of 204) disagreed with the statement that they achieve the right balance between their work and private life. The service has recognised through the monitoring of staff absences that work-related stress issues have increased.

The service has a positive health and safety culture

The service continues to have effective and well-understood health and safety policies and procedures in place. The health and safety documents we reviewed were in date and comprehensive. The interviews we carried out with staff were positive about the health and safety culture within the service. Staff are trained regularly via a mandatory e-learning package or through the completion of health and safety-related qualifications.

These policies and procedures are readily available, and the service promotes them effectively to all staff. The service shares health and safety learning and information via three different formats, including:

1. a 'keeping safe' brief, which provides updates, data and safety event information;
2. a health and safety bulletin with top tips for various topics; and
3. a 'that's safe' notice with details relating to learning from operational incidents.

Both staff and representative bodies have confidence in the health and safety approach the service takes. The representative bodies also agree that the service includes them in the decision-making process for health and safety-related issues and that staff are encouraged to report all accidents, [near misses](#) and dangerous occurrences.

But the service doesn't monitor all staff who have secondary employment or dual contracts to make sure that they comply with the secondary employment policy and don't work excessive hours. The service's resource management team does monitor breaches of the working time directive for its own dual contract staff, and the service has a system in place to make sure these employees have rest periods. However, this doesn't extend to those who may have a second contract with another service or employer.

Absence management processes are clear

We were pleased to find that the service had updated its absence management processes and provided new communication to managers about this. There is clear guidance for managers, who are now more confident in using the process. Most staff we interviewed thought that the service manages absences well and in accordance with policy. This was an area for improvement in our last inspection, which is now closed.

Overall, the service saw an increase in staff absences, both short and long term, in the year ending 31 March 2022. It monitors sickness information and has identified that there has been an increase in work-related stress absences.

Getting the right people with the right skills

Requires improvement

Buckinghamshire 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 review its succession planning to make sure that it has effective arrangements in place to manage staff turnover while continuing to provide its core service to the public.

The service should assure itself that all staff are appropriately trained to fulfil their roles.

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 needs to do more to improve its workforce planning

The service has introduced regular workforce planning meetings, but it doesn't take full account of the skills and capabilities it needs to effectively carry out its public safety 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, before its last inspection, the service identified that it had a shortage of emergency response drivers and incident commanders. It has made a change to future apprenticeship contracts that will help mitigate this risk in the future, but it still has gaps in these capabilities. The service relies on the Fire Service College to provide its incident command training. A recent course had to be cancelled because the service couldn't identify enough candidates to attend.

The service still needs to do more to manage staff turnover and make sure that it can provide its core service to the public. It has identified that it needs an establishment of 300 firefighters to meet its public safety plan. It expects 36 people to leave the service during 2023/24. However, it has plans to recruit more staff via an apprenticeship recruitment campaign and transferee process, reaching an establishment of 294 by March 2024. Although the service has made some progress, the plans don't guarantee that the service will meet the needs of its public safety plan, and the area for improvement from our last inspection remains.

The service also needs to do more to improve the way it considers its future needs and succession planning. Of those who responded to our staff survey, 17.2 percent (35 of 204) told us that they want to leave the service immediately or within the next 12 months. The main reason identified was to achieve a better work-life balance. The service knows that future retirements in the senior leadership team will need filling with a longer-term solution than is currently in place.

Staff complete regular assessments in risk-critical skills

The service monitors staff competence via three electronic systems. It regularly updates its understanding of staff skills and risk-critical safety capabilities through annual validation and assessments. This approach means that it can identify gaps in workforce capabilities and resilience. It is positive that all the service's new recruits are enrolled on an apprenticeship firefighter course to develop their skills.

Most staff told us that they can access the training they need to be operationally effective in their roles. Of those who responded to our staff survey, 78.9 percent (161 of 204) told us they can access the learning and development they need, and 70.6 percent (144 of 204) said there are opportunities to develop their careers in the service.

The service's training plans make sure that staff can maintain competence and capability. For example, managers at stations make sure that there is enough time on a shift to complete training and exercises according to that month's theme. But the service struggles to assure the ongoing competency of all on-call staff due to some stations having fewer people and supervisory managers than required.

Some staff told us that they can access other training they need to be effective in their roles, including management skills. For example, the service has held a management course for senior and middle managers in the past year. But staff felt that they have been under too much pressure to apply the learning from this. And they feel that there is now less support to develop in preparation for promotion.

The service provides learning and development opportunities for most staff

We were pleased to see that the service continues to have a range of resources in place. These include online e-learning packages, in-person training courses and assessments.

The service provides learning and development and has improved training in prevention, management of staff absences and equality and diversity. Of those who responded to our staff survey, 72 percent (146 out of 204) agreed that they are given the same opportunities to develop as others.

But there aren't adequate processes in place to monitor that all staff access the learning they need to do their jobs effectively. Annual training in EDI is now mandatory for all staff. But the service told us that only 65 percent of its staff had completed the course in 2022/23.

Although a culture of learning is promoted through the operational assurance debrief process, the learning isn't then widely shared. The service can't assure itself that all staff have received the information that is included in the non-mandatory part of its e-learning platform. We found that the same learning points were repeated in debriefs and that opportunities for the service to improve were being missed.

Only some staff told us that they can access the whole range of learning and development resources they need to do their jobs effectively. This is likely to affect what the service can offer the public. Although the service has made some improvements to make sure that all staff are appropriately trained for their roles, staff still feel that more learning would be useful.

Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity

Requires improvement

Buckinghamshire 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 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.

Cause of concern

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.

Recommendation

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; and
- be more ambitious in its efforts to attract a more diverse workforce that better reflects the community it serves.

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 could do more to act on staff feedback

Although the service has some means of gathering staff feedback, these aren't consistent or wide-ranging. For example, the service has news bulletins, all-staff emails, chief fire officer blogs/vlogs and noticeboards both physically and virtually. But the service has identified that these forms of communication are one way and rely on people having routine access to one or more of these platforms. We look forward to seeing the outcome of the new campaign the service is about to introduce called 'speak up'. In addition to the whistleblowing policy already available, this will provide staff with an independent line to call should they wish to report an issue without going through line management.

It is positive that the service now carries out its culture surveys annually. But staff have limited confidence in the service's feedback procedures and don't think they are effective. In 2022, 75 percent (353 of 458) of staff responded to the service's own culture survey. Of those who responded, only 19 percent felt the survey results would be used constructively to make a change. We were told that staff are willing to provide feedback but don't see it as having any effect. For example, even following feedback, there are still issues with uniform and adequate changing facilities for women in the service. The service has no employee networks to engage with staff.

Representative bodies and staff associations report that the service engages with them well on topics such as health and safety. The service holds a joint consultation forum with these representatives to seek their views on new procedures and matters affecting staff. But they would like better communication from the service on wider issues such as EDI.

While the service has made some progress, the recommendation regarding staff feedback from the cause of concern identified in 2021 remains.

Staff are confident in tackling bullying, harassment and discrimination

Staff have a good understanding of what bullying, [harassment](#) and discrimination are and their negative effects on colleagues and the organisation. We were told that, when a report of bullying or harassment is made, direct line managers take the report seriously. The service has made sure that all staff are trained and clear about what to do if they encounter inappropriate behaviour.

In this inspection, 15 percent (31 of 204) of staff responding to our survey told us that they have been subject to bullying or harassment in the last 12 months. And 12 percent (25 of 204) told us that they have felt discriminated against in the last 12 months. Of these staff, most stated it was by someone more senior than them.

Although the service has clear policies and procedures in place, staff have limited confidence in how well the organisation can deal effectively with cases of bullying, harassment and discrimination as well as grievances and discipline. This is due to high workloads and capacity issues at senior management level at which most cases are investigated. Staff told us that some investigations have taken much longer than the 28-day period that the service's policy states. They also told us that some concerns haven't always been escalated to the next level for investigation when staff believe they should. This has left staff feeling worried and frustrated.

The service has addressed disproportionality in its recruitment processes

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, it identified that several candidates in its recent recruitment process were neurodiverse. It offered these candidates an opportunity to prepare by letting them see the interview questions 30 minutes before commencing the interview. This has resulted in the service employing more neurodiverse candidates. The service has pledged to be a disability-confident employer.

The service's recruitment policies are comprehensive and cover opportunities in all roles. It advertises recruitment opportunities both internally and externally. The service recently identified that 12.5 percent of the area's population is from a South Asian background. It has made connections with this community to understand the barriers to employment within the service. However, it knows it could still do more to promote its opportunities and encourage applicants from diverse backgrounds, including for middle and senior management roles.

The service has made some improvements to increase staff diversity at some levels of the organisation. In 2021/22, 16 percent (51 people) of new joiners self-declared as being from an ethnic minority background. The proportion of wholetime firefighters who were from an ethnic minority background increased from 4 percent (10 people) in 2020/21 to 5.4 percent (14 people) in 2021/22. The proportion of wholetime female firefighters remained largely the same with 7.6 percent (21 people) in 2020/21 and 7.4 percent (21 people) in 2021/22.

For the whole workforce, in 2021/22, 8.4 percent were from an ethnic minority background compared with 29.9 percent in the local population and 8 percent throughout all fire and rescue services. And 18.4 percent were women compared with an average of 18.6 percent throughout all fire and rescue services.

The service has taken steps to improve diversity. For example, it runs 'have a go days' and bespoke recruitment campaigns in on-call areas. The workforce supports this. But the service still needs to do more to increase the diversity of its workforce. Therefore, the recommendation regarding diversity from the cause of concern identified in 2021 remains.

The service is raising awareness of EDI

The service has improved its approach to EDI. It now does more to try and offer the right services to its communities and can support staff with [protected characteristics](#). For example, the service's EDI working group has responsibility for tasks in the service's action plan and meets regularly to maintain progress with these. A new calendar of events and key dates is now available on the service's intranet and helps the working group in raising awareness. Training in EDI is now a mandatory e-learning module. But the service still needs to do more to make sure that it continues to give greater priority to raising the awareness of EDI by monitoring:

- the results of its training courses;
- how it works with the local community;
- who it works with in the local community; and
- the collection of equality data.

While the service has made some progress, the recommendation regarding EDI from the cause of concern identified in 2021 remains.

The service has reviewed its equality impact process

The service has reviewed and updated its process to assess equality impact, which has been used to assess some of its policies and procedures. But it hasn't yet properly assessed or acted on the impact on each protected characteristic for most of its policies. The service also needs to consistently assure completed impact assessments. But it is promising that it recognises the need to improve its staff and community data to help it provide a better service to the community. A campaign to raise awareness of why it is important for staff to declare equality data, as well as make updates to the service's system, is improving the information the service has about its staff.

While the service has made some progress, the recommendation regarding the collection of staff data identified in 2021 remains. We look forward to seeing the service make changes for the workforce as a result of the updated information it has. We have closed the recommendation to make sure that it has robust processes in place to undertake equality impact assessments from the cause of concern identified in 2021.

Managing performance and developing leaders

Requires improvement

Buckinghamshire 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 put in place an open and fair process to identify, develop and support high-potential staff and aspiring leaders.

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.

The service should assure itself that it has an effective process in place for succession planning, including senior leadership roles.

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 improved how it manages individuals' performance

There is a good performance management system in place, which allows the service to effectively develop and assess the individual performance of all staff. The service has identified annual performance assessments as an organisational priority for the year and is actively monitoring their completion.

In our staff survey, 78.4 percent of staff told us that they have regular (more than once a year) discussions with their managers. Each staff member has individual goals and objectives and regular performance assessments. Staff feel confident in the performance and development arrangements in place.

The service has developed its promotion and progression processes

The service has put considerable effort into developing its promotion and progression processes so that they are fair and all staff can understand them. A flow chart describes what is needed at each level of the promotion process, and an appointments board makes the final decision. The organisational development team supports staff with a development plan if they are unsuccessful at any stage in the process.

The service manages selection processes consistently. An independent person is allocated to every promotion process to make sure that decision-making is consistent. And it uses temporary promotions appropriately to fill short-term resourcing gaps.

The promotion and progression policies cover opportunities in operational roles up to middle management. We look forward to seeing the outcome of a project to support the service in providing learning pathways for all staff. The service hopes this will make the promotion policy available to all staff in support as well as operational roles.

The service needs to do more to make sure that its promotion and progression processes are fair for all staff. For example, while it makes sure that staff can ask for reasonable adjustments from the point of application, its equality impact assessment only identifies the barriers that women might face in the process. It doesn't look to address issues for those with other protected characteristics.

The service needs to do more to diversify its future leadership

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. Some staff told us that they are prevented from applying for a promotion if they are located at a specific station due to their skill set.

The service needs to encourage applicants from diverse backgrounds into middle and senior-level positions. It tends to advertise and fill these positions internally, so it isn't making the most of opportunities to make its workforce more representative. We reviewed recent promotion rounds and found that the candidates were all from a White male background. The service has made limited progress in addressing the area for improvement identified in 2021. Therefore, the area for improvement remains.

The service still needs to do more to develop its leaders 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.

It has some talent management schemes in place to develop leaders and high-potential staff. It also has an employee support officer whose role is to develop staff identified by their annual appraisal for the promotion process. But it doesn't always manage them openly or fairly. For example, staff must take leave if their assessment day is when they are on duty, and finding cover can be difficult. The appointments board doesn't include an independent representative from HR to create consistency in decision-making, and decisions aren't publicised. Staff told us that this has resulted in inconsistency and undermines staff perception of fairness in the process. Of those who responded to our staff survey, 61 percent (125 of 204) agreed that the promotion process is fair.

The service should consider putting in place more formal arrangements to identify and support members of staff to become senior leaders. There is a significant gap in its succession planning. The service has made limited progress in addressing the area for improvement identified in 2021. Therefore, the area for improvement remains.

In December 2022, the Fire Standards Board published two new standards – [leading the service](#) and [leading and developing people](#). The service needs to do more to make sure it implements these standards effectively.

The service carries out robust background checks on its current and future staff

We are pleased that the service carries out annual enhanced disclosure and barring service checks on all its staff who regularly work with people in the community. This means that the service can intervene if a future or current member of staff isn't suitable for their role. The service's robust procedures for background checks make sure that it safeguards its staff and the communities it serves.

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BFRS HMICFRS Round 3: Summary of Findings

Area 1	Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies	Judgment: REQUIRES IMPROVEMENT
Main Findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service gathers, maintains and shares a range of risk information • The service builds some understanding of risk from operational activity 	
Areas for Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service should make sure it is informed by a comprehensive understanding of current and future risk. It should use a wide range of data to build the risk profile and use operational data to test that the risk profile is up to date. • The service, through regular engagement with its local community, needs to build a more comprehensive profile of risk in its service area. • The service should make sure that the aims and objectives of prevention, protection and response activity are clearly outlined in its integrated risk management plan. 	
Area 2	Preventing fires and other risks	Judgment: REQUIRES IMPROVEMENT
Main Findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service has revised its prevention strategy • Staff are good at completing fire and wellness visits for older people • The service is good at responding to safeguarding concerns • The service works well with others to prevent fires and other incidents • The service has arrangements to tackle fire-setting behaviour 	
Areas for Improvement	Cause of Concern & <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service should evaluate its prevention work, so it understands the benefits better. 	
Area 3	Protecting the public through fire regulation	Judgment: INADEQUATE

Main Findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fire safety audit records are of a good quality • The service takes enforcement action when needed, but confidence is reducing • The service’s protection team is well trained and resourced • The service is able to adapt to new legislation • The service is working with others when necessary • The service responds well to building consultations and licencing requests
Areas for Improvement	<p>Cause of Concern &</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service should review its response to false alarms to ensure protection and operational resources are used effectively. • The service should ensure its staff have the confidence to use the full range of enforcement powers. • The service should make sure it plans its work with local businesses and large organisations to share information and expectations on how they can comply with fire safety regulations.

Area 4	Responding to fires and other emergencies	Judgment: REQUIRES IMPROVEMENT
Main Findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service isn’t meeting its own response standards, but does attend incidents within a reasonable time frame • The service has good command of incidents • The service works well with Thames Valley Fire Control • The service has a good process to gather operational performance information • The service is making good progress to align its procedures with national operational guidance 	
Areas for Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service should assure itself that it understands what resources it reasonably requires to meet its foreseeable risk; it should make sure that all its fire engines can be sufficiently resourced, if required. • The service should make sure that its mobile data terminals are reliable so firefighters can easily access up-to-date risk information. 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service should make sure it has an effective system for sharing and applying the learning from operational incidents • The service should make sure that it consistently gives relevant information to the public to help keep them safe during and after all incidents.
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Area 5	Responding to major and multi-agency incidents	Judgment: ADEQUATE
Main Findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service is prepared to respond to major and multi-agency incidents • The service works well with other fire services • The service takes part in cross-border exercising • The service's staff have a good understanding of JESIP • The service works well with other partner organisations in the Thames Valley • The service uses national learning to update its procedures 	
Areas for Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. 	

Area 6	Making best use of resources	Judgment: REQUIRES IMPROVEMENT
Main Findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service has a comprehensive financial plan • The service has identified financial savings from collaboration. • The service has tested its continuity arrangements 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service continues to have sound financial management
Areas for Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 it sets out in its next integrated risk management plan. • The service should have effective measures in place to assure itself that its workforce is productive, that its time is used as efficiently and effectively as possible and in a more joined up way to meet the priorities in its integrated risk management plan. • The service should make sure it effectively monitors, reviews and evaluates the benefits and outcomes of any collaboration activity.

Area 7	Making the fire and rescue service affordable now and in the future	Judgment: REQUIRES IMPROVEMENT
Main Findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service has developed a range of future spending scenarios • Reserves are now increasing • The service's fleet and estate are being improved 	
Areas for Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service needs to assure itself that it is maximising opportunities to improve workforce productivity and develop future capacity through use of innovation, including the use of appropriate and up-to-date technology. • The service should assure itself that its IT systems are resilient, reliable, accurate and accessible. • The service should make sure it has the right skills and capacity in place to successfully manage change across the organisation. 	

Area 8	Promoting the right values and culture	Judgment: REQUIRES IMPROVEMENT
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Main Findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service's values are understood but not demonstrated by all staff • The service provides good well-being provisions to its workforce, but work-related stress isn't being fully addressed • The service has a positive health and safety culture • Absence management processes are clear
Areas for Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service should assure itself that senior managers are visible and demonstrate service values through their behaviours. • The service should proactively monitor working hours (including overtime) to improve staff well-being. • The service should monitor secondary contracts to make sure staff don't work excessive hours.

Area 9	Getting the right people with the right skills	Judgment: REQUIRES IMPROVEMENT
Main Findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff complete regular assessments in risk critical skills • The service provides learning and development opportunities for most staff 	
Areas for Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service should review its succession planning to make sure that it has effective arrangements in place to manage staff turnover while continuing to provide its core service to the public. • The service should assure itself that all staff are appropriately trained to fulfil their role. 	

Area 10	Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity	Judgment: REQUIRES IMPROVEMENT
Main Findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff are confident in tackling bullying, harassment and discrimination • The service has addressed disproportionality in its recruitment processes • The service is raising awareness of EDI • The service has reviewed its equality impact process 	

Areas for Improvement	Cause of Concern
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Area 11	Managing performance and developing leaders	Judgment: REQUIRES IMPROVEMENT
Main Findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service has improved how it manages individuals' performance • The service has developed its promotion and progression processes • The service carries out robust background checks on its current and future staff 	
Areas for Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service should put in place an open and fair process to identify, develop and support high-potential staff and aspiring leaders. • 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. • The service should assure itself that it has an effective process in place for succession planning of its senior leadership roles. 	

Sent by email:

Mick Osborne
Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service

17 October 2023

Dear Mick,

UNDER EMBARGO Round 3 Fire and Rescue Service Report

Please find attached an embargoed copy of your service inspection report. Also attached is our response to your pre-publication comments.

These documents are under embargo until 00.01 on 19 October 2023 when they will be published on our website. Please ensure the content of these documents is kept confidential until then.

A copy of this report and press release has also been shared with the chair (or equivalent) of your fire and rescue authority. As you will be aware, all fire and rescue authorities must give due regard to our reports and recommendations (section 7.5 of the Fire and Rescue National Framework for England 2018).

Our national findings will be summarised in HMCI Andy Cooke's 2023 State of Fire and Rescue report, which will be published in 2024.

Some services have already received recommendations (causes of concern) by letter from us. Some services will receive recommendations for the first time in their reports. If your service report contains a recommendation, and you have not already received a letter from us regarding this, you should prepare, update and regularly publish an action plan, detailing how the recommendation(s) are being actioned. If the fire and rescue authority does not propose to undertake any action as a result of a recommendation, reasons for this should be given as soon as possible. Please send your action plan and any comments to hmicfrsfireteam@hmicfrs.gov.uk.

Like you, we would like to keep the public fully informed and updated on your response to our report. We are still examining options to make all action plans easily accessible via our website. In the meantime, it would be helpful if, when responding, you could also provide us with a link to where your response is published, again, via the email address - hmicfrsfireteam@hmicfrs.gov.uk.

Once again, I would like to offer my thanks to you and your service for your co-operation with the inspection process. We look forward to continuing to work with you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'RW', is placed over a light grey dotted rectangular area.

Roy Wilsher OBE QFSM

His Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary

His Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services