

Approval date: 9 March 2016



**Statement of Assurance
2014/2015**

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* Changes and additions compared with the previous 2013/14 Statement of Assurance are highlighted in grey.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Although Fire and Rescue Services in England are run by local government bodies, the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 requires that local fire and rescue authorities must have regard to direction from central government. This direction is issued in the form of a 'National Framework' which sets out the Government's strategic aims and requirements for Fire and Rescue Services. In the most recent update to the National Framework, in 2012, the Government introduced a requirement that:

'Fire and rescue authorities must provide annual assurance on financial, governance and operational matters and show how they have due regard to the expectations set out in their integrated risk management plan and the requirements included in the Framework. To provide assurance, fire and rescue authorities must publish an annual statement of assurance'.

- 1.2 The first of the new statements of assurance were published during the 2013/14 financial year and are required annually thereafter.
- 1.3 The purpose of this document is to provide the public and Government with assurance that Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority ('The Authority') met the requirements set out in the National Framework and accompanying Government guidance¹ during the 2014/15 financial year.
- 1.4 Where relevant the document draws on, consolidates and summarises the findings of existing assurance processes relating to financial, governance and operational matters that were set up to meet other statutory and regulatory requirements of fire and rescue authorities.

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

2. FINANCIAL ASSURANCE

- 2.1 It is a statutory requirement under the Accounts and Audit (England) Regulations 2011 for authorities to publish the financial results of their activities for the year. This 'Statement of Accounts', shows the annual costs of providing the service and is determined by a Code of Practice which aims to give a "true and fair" view of the financial position and transactions of the authority.
- 2.2 The Annual Financial Statements for the Year Ending 31 March 2015 can be found on our website:
- http://bucksfire.gov.uk/files/7814/4301/6123/Audited_Annual_Financial_Statements_2014-15.pdf
- 2.3 The financial statements are required to be audited under the Audit Commission Act 1998. The auditors are responsible for:
- forming an opinion on the financial statements;
 - reviewing the Annual Governance Statement;
 - forming a conclusion on the arrangements that the Authority has in place to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.
- 2.4 The table overleaf summarises the findings from all elements of the appointed auditor's work.
- 2.5 The appointed auditors noted the following in their annual audit letter:
- The organisation has proper arrangements in place for securing financial resilience
 - The organisation has proper arrangements for challenging how it secures economy, efficiency and effectiveness
- 2.6 The auditors also tested for the risk of management 'override' but found no evidence of inappropriate or biased management decisions having been made.
- 2.7 In addition to the statutory requirement to publish annual financial results, the government is committed to increasing transparency across local authorities. One of the first steps in this process is for the publication online of information relating to spend items in excess of £500. In accordance with that requirement, the Authority is publishing monthly schedules of payments, which can be found on our website:

<http://bucksfire.gov.uk/fire-authority/financial-information/spend-over-500/>

Area of work	Result
Audit of the financial statement of Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority for the financial year ended 31 March 2015 in accordance with International Standards on Auditing (UK & Ireland).	On 23 September 2015 we issued an unqualified audit opinion in respect of the Authority.
Form a conclusion on the arrangements the Authority has made for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.	On 23 September 2015 we issued an unqualified value for money conclusion.
Report to the National Audit Office on the accuracy of the consolidation pack the Authority is required to prepare for the Whole of Government Accounts.	We reported our findings to the National Audit Office on 23 September 2015.
Consider the completeness of disclosures on the Authority's Annual Governance Statement, identify any inconsistencies with the other information of which we are aware from our work and consider whether it complies with CIPFA/ SOLACE guidance.	No issues to report.
Consider whether, in the public interest, we should make a report on any matter coming to our notice in the course of the audit.	No issues to report.
Determine whether any other action should be taken in relation to our responsibilities under the Audit Commission Act.	No issues to report.

3. GOVERNANCE

- 3.1 The Authority is responsible for maintaining a sound system of internal control that supports the achievement of its policies, aims and objectives whilst safeguarding public money and organisational assets. There is also a requirement to ensure that the Authority is administered prudently and economically and that resources are used efficiently and effectively and that sound arrangements are in place for the identification and management of risks.
- 3.2 The Authority's approach to governance is based on the six core principles of good governance set out in the CIPFA / SOLACE governance framework ("*Delivering Good Governance in Local Government*"):
1. Focusing on the purpose of the Authority and on outcomes for the community and creating and implementing a vision for the local area;
 2. Members and officers working together to achieve a common purpose with clearly defined functions and roles;
 3. Promoting values for the Authority and demonstrating the values of good governance through upholding high standards of conduct and behaviour.
 4. Taking informed and transparent decisions which are subject to effective scrutiny and managing risk;
 5. Developing the capacity and capability of members and officers to be effective;
 6. Engaging with local people and other stakeholders to ensure robust public accountability.
- 3.3 There is already a statutory requirement for the Authority to produce an annual governance statement to demonstrate and evidence that it operates an effective system of internal control. The internal control systems underlying the annual governance statement are assessed by Internal Audit to ensure that they are adequate and effective so that:
- The Authority can establish the extent to which they can rely on the whole system; and,
 - Individual managers can establish the reliability of the systems and controls for which they are responsible.

- 3.4 The Chief Internal Auditor's most recent opinion on the Authority's internal control environment was published in the Annual Governance Statement for the 2014/15 financial year. This stated that:

*In my opinion the system of internal control provides **reasonable** assurance regarding the effective, efficient and economic exercise of the Authority's functions. During 2014/15 there has been continued improvement to Bucks & Milton Keynes Fire Authority's system of internal control through the on-going development of policies and procedures covering the key control processes. This demonstrates a positive direction of travel towards robust and effective internal control and risk management that will facilitate the effective exercise of the Authority's functions.*

- 3.5 Additionally, the Chief Internal Auditor's [annual audit letter](#) identified no issues to report following its consideration of the completeness of disclosures in the Authority's Annual Governance Statement, its consistency with other information of which the Auditor was aware and its compliance with CIPFA / SOLACE guidance.

- 3.6 Further details of the Authority's governance arrangements and the internal auditor's findings in relation to these can be found in the Annual Governance Statement 2014/15:

[http://bucksfire.gov.uk/files/7114/4345/2321/Annual Governance Statement 2014-15.pdf](http://bucksfire.gov.uk/files/7114/4345/2321/Annual_Governance_Statement_2014-15.pdf)

- 3.7 The Annual Governance Statement also confirms that the Authority met its statutory obligation to review its Pay Policy Statement annually. This sets out its policies on the remuneration of its chief officers, the remuneration of its lowest paid employees and the relationship between the remuneration of its chief officers and the remuneration of its employees who are not chief officers. This was approved and adopted by the Authority at its February 2015 meeting, and can be viewed via the following link to the Authority's website:

<http://bucksfire.gov.uk/fire-authority/policies/>

4. OPERATIONAL ASSURANCE

4.1 The Government requires Fire Authorities to provide assurance that they meet the requirements arising out of the legislative and policy framework for fire and rescue services. In particular:

- Details of specific events that raise issues of operational competence or delivery such as advice received under health and safety or other legislation together with assurance that these matters have been considered and, where appropriate, acted on;
- That integrated risk management plans are consulted on and that during the consultations appropriate information was provided to enable active and informed participation;
- Details of any agreements and / or mutual aid arrangements with other relevant bodies such as neighbouring fire and rescue services.

Statutory Duties and Operational Effectiveness

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

- The Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004;
- The Civil Contingencies Act 2004;
- The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005;
- The Fire and Rescue Services (Emergencies) (England) Order 2007;
- The Localism Act 2011;
- The Fire and Rescue National Framework for England.

4.2 The last formal external assurance of the Authority's operational effectiveness and performance was carried out in June 2014 as part of a comprehensive 'Peer Review' process developed by the Chief Fire Officers Association in conjunction with the Local Government Association.

4.3 The Peer Review focused in depth on the key areas of:

- Leadership and Governance
- Outcomes for Citizens
- Organisational Capacity
- Community Risk Management
- Prevention

- Response

4.4 The Review also considered the following areas on a more 'light touch' basis:

- Training and Development
- Protection
- Health and Safety
- Call Management

4.5 Although the Peer Review identified a number of areas for consideration, it did not identify any issues that would raise concerns about the Authority's operational competency or delivery. All areas for consideration raised in the report were already known to service management and are already been captured in improvement plans.

4.6 The Peer Review also found the Authority's internal arrangements for operational assurance to be robust:

"Operational Assurance is delivered by a highly motivated and well-resourced team. This has led to a proactive approach to incident monitoring and feedback, monthly performance reports, debriefs and gap analysis, with actions influencing training, operational intelligence and health and safety".

4.7 A full report of the Peer Review Outcomes can be viewed on the Authority's website:

http://bucksfire.gov.uk/files/6514/1803/5987/ITEM_15_Local_Government_Association_LGA_Peer_Challenge_Report_Appendix_A.pdf

5. INTEGRATED RISK MANAGEMENT PLANNING

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

- be easily accessible and publicly available; and,

- reflect effective consultation throughout its development and at all review stages with the community, its workforce and representative bodies, and partners.
- 5.2 The Government guidance relating to statements of assurance requires that they should include details of IRMP consultations and, in particular, that appropriate information was provided to enable active and informed participation.
- 5.3 Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority regularly reviews the fire and rescue related risks to the community it serves and updates its IRMP in response to any material changes to the nature and level of the risks identified and assessed.
- 5.4 The Authority's current IRMP, known as the '2015-20 Public Safety Plan', is published on its website. This sets out the Authority's strategy for achieving its vision of making *'Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes the safest areas in England in which to live, work and travel'*:
- [http://bucksfire.gov.uk/files/8114/2116/4524/2015 - 20 PSP Updated after 17 Dec CFA.pdf](http://bucksfire.gov.uk/files/8114/2116/4524/2015_-_20_PSP_Updated_after_17_Dec_CFA.pdf)
- 5.5 The draft Public Safety Plan was subject to extensive consultations prior to the Authority reaching any decisions. The consultation process embraced key stakeholder groups including the general public, Authority staff, neighbouring fire and rescue services and a range of other organisations with a potential interest in the development of the plan. It also included the use of qualitative consultation methods such as 'community engagement forums' and focus groups which encourage participants to reflect in depth about their priorities for the Authority while both receiving and questioning background information and discussing service delivery issues in detail. Full details of the consultation process and its outcomes are available on the Authority's website:
- [http://bucksfire.gov.uk/files/5414/1803/6075/ITEM_16_2015-20 PSP Consultation - 17 December 14 CFA Paper Annexes.pdf](http://bucksfire.gov.uk/files/5414/1803/6075/ITEM_16_2015-20_PSP_Consultation_-_17_December_14_CFA_Paper_Annexes.pdf)
- 5.6 The Authority has also established a framework of **key performance indicators** and measures to help it assess progress towards the achievement of its vision. Performance in relation to these is reported to the Authority's Executive Committee on a regular basis whose role is to scrutinise any areas of under-performance together with proposals for corrective action. A report on performance outcomes against the framework of indicators and measures can be viewed on the Authority's website (at item 13, pages 121-143):

http://bucksfire.gov.uk/files/6414/3714/4213/EXECUTIVE_COMMITTEE_PACK_290715.pdf

6. MUTUAL AID, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL RESILIENCE

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

- Its active participation in the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum which comprises other Category 1 and 2 responders. The forum maintains a community risk register which the Authority considers as part of its integrated risk management planning process;
- Review of the National Risk Register, National Risk Assessment and National Resilience Planning Assumptions which are maintained by the UK Government Cabinet Office to inform planning in relation to major civil emergencies of a national or regional nature;
- Mutual aid agreements with neighbouring fire and rescue authorities which enable authorities to provide each other with additional resources to deal with emergencies that cannot be dealt with by an authority acting alone. Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority maintains formal mutual aid agreements with all six of its neighbours – Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, London, Royal Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Northamptonshire. Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority also provided mutual aid to Devon and Somerset FRS during the flooding on the Somerset Levels in February 2014 in the form of personnel and a specialist appliance. The cost of this operation was recovered from the host FRS.
- Working with South Central Ambulance Service (SCAS) to provide co-responding services to medical emergencies and in allowing SCAS crews to use Authority premises.

6.2 Also the Authority maintains specialist resources to enable it to deal with major civil emergencies such as major transport incidents, natural disasters and terrorist incidents. These include capabilities such as its Urban Search and Rescue, and, Water Rescue Teams which it deploys in support of other Authorities during major emergencies such as the instances of wide area flooding that have taken place in recent years. The cost of providing such assistance is recovered from requesting Authority. The Authority also collaborates with all the other South East Fire and Rescue Services to jointly fund the post of a Station Commander who is seconded to the South East Counter

Terrorism Unit. This post has been filled by a BFRS Officer since April 2014 who acts as a focal point for advice to and from the unit.

6.3 As a Category 1 responder as defined in the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, business continuity is a high priority for Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority. During the period covered by this statement the Authority was subject to strike action by members of the Fire Brigades Union as part of its dispute with central government over changes to pension arrangements. During these periods of strike action the Service's business continuity arrangements have been put into operation. As result fire cover was provide for the whole of the Service's area by the Service's own employees. Every fire call received during these periods of strike action that warranted an attendance received one, in a timely manner and the incidents were successfully dealt with.

6.4 Also the Service has engaged in a partnership with the other two Thames Valley Fire & Rescue Services by sharing the Command and Control function to increase operational resilience and make use of Government grant to release year on year cost savings.

Its technology includes a new mobilising system, which enables control operators to identify the exact geographic location of an incident more quickly and, at the same time, pinpoint the precise position of each available fire appliance and officer.

Every fire appliance across the three services has been fitted or upgraded with the latest mobile data terminals which display incidents on a mapping system, enabling fire crews to see their location and that of the incident in real-time. Mobile data terminals also provide the crews with risk-critical information, such as individual building design and details about any special hazards or unusual processes or manufacturing at a particular location.

To ensure resilience, a non-staffed secondary control room has been created in Kidlington. In the unlikely event that the primary control room fails or needs to be evacuated, North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service will take 999 calls and mobilise resources on behalf of Thames Valley Fire Control Service for the short period of time needed to transfer control staff to Kidlington.

7. DECLARATION

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

Jason Thelwell
Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive

Councillor David Watson
Chairman, Overview and Audit Committee