

Fire & Rescue Service 2021/22

Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service



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About this inspection

This is our third inspection of fire and rescue services across England. We first inspected Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service in June 2019, publishing a report with our findings in December 2019 on the service's effectiveness and efficiency and how it looks after its people. Our second inspection, in autumn 2020, considered how the service was responding to the pandemic. This inspection considers for a second time the service's effectiveness, efficiency and people.

In this round of our inspections of all 44 fire and rescue services in England, we answer three main questions:

1. How effective is the fire and rescue service at keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks?
2. How efficient is the fire and rescue service at keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks?
3. How well does the fire and rescue service look after its people?

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

What inspection judgments mean

Our categories of graded judgment are:

- outstanding;
- good;
- requires improvement; and
- inadequate.








Good is our expected graded judgment for all fire and rescue services. It is based on policy, practice or performance that meet pre-defined grading criteria, which are informed by any relevant [national operational guidance](#) or standards.





If the service exceeds what we expect for good, we will judge it as outstanding.







If we find shortcomings in the service, we will judge it as requires improvement.

If we find serious critical failings of policy, practice or performance of the fire and rescue service, we will judge it as inadequate.

Overview

Question	This inspection	2018/19
 Effectiveness	 Requires improvement	Requires improvement
Understanding fires and other risks	 Requires improvement	Good
Preventing fires and other risks	 Requires improvement	Requires improvement
Protecting the public through fire regulation	 Requires improvement	Requires improvement
Responding to fires and other emergencies	 Good	Requires improvement
Responding to major and multi-agency incidents	 Good	Good

Question	This inspection	2018/19
 Efficiency	 Requires improvement	Requires improvement
Making best use of resources	 Requires improvement	Requires improvement
Future affordability	 Requires improvement	Requires improvement

Question	This inspection	2018/19
 People	 Requires improvement	Good
Promoting the right values and culture	 Requires improvement	Good
Getting the right people with the right skills	 Requires improvement	Good
Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity	 Requires improvement	Good
Managing performance and developing leaders	 Requires improvement	Requires improvement

HMI summary

It was a pleasure to return to Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service and I am grateful for the positive way the service connected with our inspection. I want to thank the service for working with us by accommodating the virtual approach of this inspection. Inspections would normally be conducted using a hybrid approach but inspecting against the backdrop of the pandemic meant we had to inspect virtually. I also want to recognise the disruption caused by the pandemic. This has been considered in our findings.

Since there was a gap of only 18 months between our first and latest inspections and much of the intervening time was overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it isn't surprising that many of our findings are like those in our first report.

The service has worked hard to address the cause of concern from our 2019 inspection about whether its resources can meet its unique model of operational response. It has increased its capacity to meet its public safety plan and so this cause of concern has been closed.

We are encouraged by the service's work to improve value for money, but we still have concerns about the service's funding model as its limited [reserves](#) are being used to supplement funding of its response functions.

The service operates an innovative, flexible and graduated approach to operational resourcing, designed to cover low level daily demand and infrequent high risk.

It knows it needs 12 immediately available fire engines to deal with normal daily demand. There are 19 stations throughout the county with 30 fire engines: the leading 12 fire engines are located to deal with typical incidents. The service plans to increase the number of fire engines and staff when needed for an unprecedented incident, or if several incidents happen at the same time.

There are, therefore, a further 18 fire engines in readiness to resource this 1 percent of occasions. These additional crews are available on 'delayed turnout' of 20 minutes, 60 minutes or up to 3 hours and can be called upon to respond to incidents or provide cover arrangements. They have, by design, low availability and although may not cost too much to run on an annual basis, at some stage the little-used stations and fire engines will need capital investment.


Moreover, the daily demand is met by a mixture of current (but reducing) [on-call](#) staff, and [wholetime](#) staff conducting extra 'bank' shifts. We believe it would be a very significant challenge to crew all the additional fire engines it holds should a major incident occur.

The service needs to prioritise how it identifies and works to reduce risk and communicate this to the public. Focus on improving its prevention work is especially important.

Staff are committed to the service and feel pride in the work they do. Many staff, however, feel overworked and under pressure, which negatively affects their productivity and morale. Support for staff, especially under-represented groups, could be better. The service needs to do more to provide a fair, diverse and inclusive place to work.

The service is a valued member of its [local resilience forum](#), through which it worked well with other emergency services and local government to provide support during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its support to vaccination centres and community health agencies continues. It functioned well during the pandemic and did a good job of working with its staff in this difficult period.

We look forward to seeing the service build on the improvements it has already made to address these important areas where work is clearly needed.



Matt Parr

HM Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Service in numbers



Response

Buckinghamshire

England

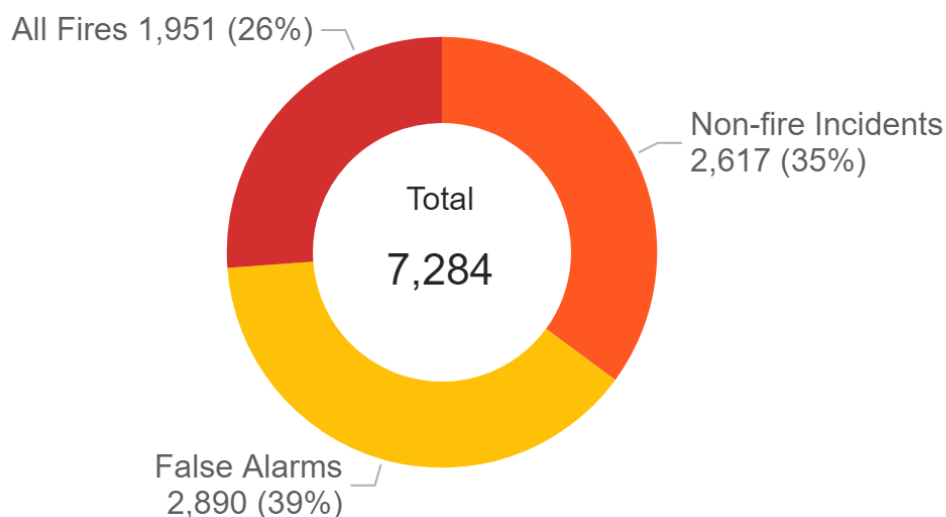
Incidents attended per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2021	8.91	9.16
Home fire safety checks carried out by fire and rescue service per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2021	1.02	4.47
Fire safety audits per 100 known premises Year ending 31 March 2020	1.97	2.55
Average availability of pumps Year ending 31 March 2020	47.14%	83.07%



Cost

Firefighter cost per person per year Year ending 31 March 2020	£20.08	£23.82
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Incidents attended in the year to 31 March 2021

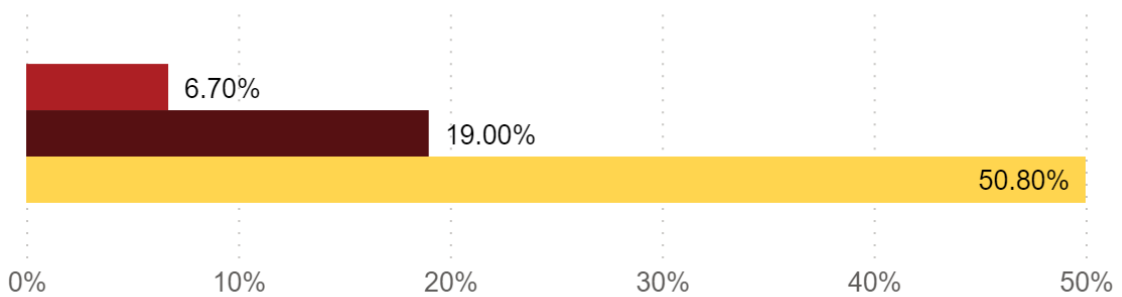




Five-year change in total workforce 2015 to 2020	-15.22%	-5.30%
Number of firefighters per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2020	0.44	0.63
Percentage of firefighters who are wholetime Year ending 31 March 2020	67.05%	65.10%

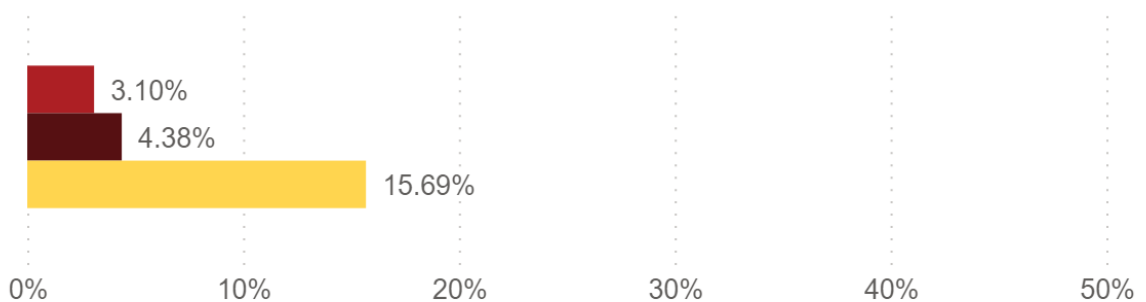
Percentage population, firefighters and workforce who are female as at 31 March 2020

Female ● Firefighters ● Workforce ● Local population



Percentage of population, firefighters, and workforce who are Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) as at 31 March 2020

BAME ● Firefighters ● Workforce ● Local population



For more information on data and analysis throughout this report, please view the [‘About the data’ section of our website](#).

Effectiveness



How effective is the service at keeping people safe and secure?



Requires improvement

Summary

An effective fire and rescue service will identify and assess the full range of foreseeable fire and rescue risks its community faces. It should target its fire prevention and protection activities to those who are at greatest risk from fire, and make sure fire safety legislation is being enforced. And when the public calls for help, respond promptly with the right skills and equipment to deal with the incident effectively. Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service's overall effectiveness requires improvement.

Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service is a small and tightly resourced service. Staff work hard to keep people safe and secure. But the service doesn't have clear processes for prioritising its work. This means that it is not always focused on areas of highest risk and is less effective than it should be.

The service's [integrated risk management plan](#) (for 2020–25) doesn't explore the broad range of community risks in enough detail. The information the plan uses to identify risks is more limited than it used in its previous plans. And for those risks that it does identify, it doesn't lay out what the possible impacts of the risks are or how it intends to use its prevention, protection and response functions to address them. Accordingly, our assessment of this specific area has dropped from 'good' in our previous report to 'requires improvement'.

We are particularly concerned about low productivity in the service's prevention work. Staff in these teams told us that the system used to record their work is not fit for purpose, and we found little evidence of managerial oversight. We are particularly disappointed that the management of fire and wellness visits hasn't improved, given that this was raised in our previous inspection.

The service has an innovative approach for resourcing its response functions. It is based on the risks it has identified in the integrated risk management plan and on extensive research to identify patterns of demand, which it uses its engines and response staff flexibly to meet. It has increased its capacity and the availability of its immediate response fire engines since our first inspection. Accordingly, our assessment of this specific area has improved from 'requires improvement' in our first report to 'good'.

The service has done a good job of anticipating and planning for possible major risks and threats it may face – not just in its own service area, but also in neighbouring areas where it might be asked to respond in an emergency. It works well with the other two Thames Valley fire and rescue services, sharing information up to 10 km across borders, and is a valued member of the [local resilience forum \(LRF\)](#). It regularly carries out planned exercises for major and multi-agency incidents, including mass casualty, mass evacuation, wildfire and flooding.

Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies



Requires improvement (2019: Good)

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. Arrangements should be put in place through the service's prevention, protection and response capabilities to prevent or mitigate these risks for the public.

Areas for improvement

- 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 its integrated risk management plan 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 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.

The service does not consider all of the risks it faces

The service hasn't fully assessed all the risks it faces as part of its most recent integrated risk management plan (IRMP), which it calls its public safety plan. This covers the years 2020–25. When assessing risk, it has only considered limited information from internal and external sources, which hasn't enabled it to build a comprehensive risk profile. For example, its previous plans considered demographic, health and lifestyle data to inform prevention activity. But this was not evident in its latest plan, which only considers information about the built environment and high impact but low frequency emergency events such as flooding. The public safety plan doesn't make it clear how the service intends to reduce the impact of these risks and understand community-level risk, as it does not include any aims for its prevention and protection activity.

The service has undertaken consultation with the public on its latest safety plan, but the returns to this were less than its previous consultations. The service's latest consultation, completed via an independent company, generated 58 online responses. Five focus groups were held to discuss the service's future, attended by 55 people in total. No changes were made to the IRMP following this consultation.

The service could do more to understand community risk

The service's [integrated risk management plan](#) doesn't fully identify the risks to the public, nor how they will be met. For example, the only vulnerability within the population that the service identifies is that the average age of the area's population is increasing. There is no explanation of the possible impact of this, or of the ways the service intends to mitigate the risk in support of this vulnerable group.

It isn't clear from the plan how the service intends to use its prevention, protection and response resources to reduce the risks and threats the community and the service face, either now or in the future. The public safety plan contains limited detail on what action the service plans to take in response to any anticipated change to risk levels in the future.

The service gathers information about the risks its firefighters face in response to incidents

The service collects information about the places and threats it has identified as being at greatest risk for its firefighters when they respond to an incident. The sample of this information that we reviewed was not always accurate and up-to-date. For example, information about short-term domestic risks that potentially put people at a higher risk in case of a fire, like a resident keeping medical cylinders in their home, was out of date or inaccurate. We heard that staff don't always trust the information is up-to-date and therefore don't always use it to inform their response plans.

The site-specific risk information that is collected isn't routinely communicated throughout the service and isn't readily available or understood by all staff. This process needs to be improved so that staff in prevention, protection and/or response roles can access the information they need. For example, the risk database includes information about the same building in different formats and locations. This means that the service can't effectively identify, reduce and mitigate all risks to

both the public, its firefighters and support staff when responding to an incident or conducting site visits.

The service is good at using information from operational incidents attended to improve its understanding of current and past risk

The service records and communicates risk information. It also routinely updates risk assessments and uses feedback from local and national operational activity to inform its planning assumptions. The service has a dedicated central team that conducts routine assessments of its incident response data and its known risks, to ensure its resource planning assumptions and allocations continue to be correct.

The service is ahead of schedule to improve its information about high-rise risk following the Grenfell Tower fire inquiry

During this round of inspections, we sampled how each fire and rescue service has responded to the recommendations and learning from phase one of the Grenfell Tower fire inquiry.

Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service has responded positively and proactively to the lessons learned from this tragedy. The service is on track to having assessed the risk of each high-rise building in its service area by the end of 2021.

It has carried out a fire safety audit and collected and passed relevant risk information to its response teams about buildings identified as high risk and all high-rise buildings using cladding that is similar to the cladding installed on Grenfell Tower. But it doesn't always share this information with its prevention teams. Nor does it routinely make sure that its protection team is aware of new and emerging information about this risk. This means that the service isn't always effectively identifying, reducing and mitigating all the risk associated with high-rise premises.

Preventing fires and other risks



Requires improvement (2019: 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 sector, as well as with the police and ambulance services. They should provide intelligence and risk information with these other organisations when they identify vulnerability or exploitation.

Cause of concern

Prevention activity is not a sufficiently high priority for the service, and it is not adequately identifying those most at risk from fire.

Recommendations

By 30 September 2021, the service should have plans in place for:

- an effective system to define the levels of risk in the community;
- the revision of its prevention strategy in order that it clearly prioritises the people most at risk of fire and other emergencies, giving focus and direction to specialist teams; and
- the review of systems and processes for dealing with referrals from individuals and partner agencies. This is to make sure that they are managed effectively and those referrals with highest identified risk are prioritised.

Areas for improvement

- The service should understand the reasons for its decreasing number of prevention visits and consider how it can better target those who are most at risk of fire.
- The service should evaluate its prevention work, so 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.

Prevention activity is not a priority for the service

The service's prevention plan isn't clearly aligned with the risks in its IRMP. The prevention plan was developed before the public safety plan and there is no evidence that it has been reviewed since. The plan is high-level and doesn't include details about how it should be delivered by the prevention department and response teams in a joined-up way. Nor does it explain how it will result in a reduction of risk for those most vulnerable to fire and other emergencies.

We are concerned by the decline in the number of prevention visits carried out by the service since 2016. As of March 2020, just prior to the pandemic, the service was carrying out 2.02 visits per 1,000 population, which was well below the national average of 10.17. This problem, which we raised in our previous inspection in 2019, has yet to be addressed. We recognise that much of this time was during the pandemic but the area for improvement remains.

We found that specialist teams and firefighters were unclear about what work they should prioritise and we found little evidence of management oversight of their productivity. The system used to record prevention activity was repeatedly described by staff as not fit for purpose and the information that is used to manage the service's fire and wellness visits is difficult to access and analyse. We are disappointed to see

that the service hasn't changed the way it co-ordinates its fire and wellness visits, which we heard could be improved during the last inspection.

Prevention work happens in isolation and is not well co-ordinated and we found little evidence of relevant information being provided to the service's protection and response functions. For example, although thorough protection activity had been conducted in several of the county's high-rise residential buildings, there had only been 30 domestic fire safety checks (fire and wellness visits) to these buildings. As a result, [vulnerable people](#) and others may not be getting the support they need.

The service hasn't improved its approach to targeting people who are most at risk from fire

The service doesn't have a clear, risk-based approach that enables it to direct prevention activity towards the people most at risk from fire and other emergencies. Although the service has developed a scoring system for incoming referrals to the fire and wellness visit programme, we found evidence that visits aren't consistently being prioritised based on risk. The service identifies its ageing population as a potential risk within its public safety plan, but its risk scoring means that an occupant over the age of 80 who requests a home visit but has no other identified risk will not receive one.

The service has developed local station area action plans, which use a wider set of data to identify areas for targeted prevention work. Despite this, the station area action plans are yet to be implemented throughout the service and it is not clear how they will be co-ordinated and monitored by local management.

The service did well to adapt its prevention activity during COVID-19

We considered how the service adapted its prevention work during our COVID-19 specific inspection in November 2020. At that time, we found it had adapted its public prevention work appropriately. Since then, we are encouraged to find that the service continued to provide face-to-face fire and wellness visits for those most vulnerable to fire, where it was safe and necessary to do so. If this wasn't possible, or if the resident didn't want an in-person visit, telephone advice was provided. The service has recorded those residents who have not been visited, but has not yet decided how to address this. The service staff supporting vaccination and test centres also took the opportunity to speak to people about fire safety.

The service is proactive in identifying and reporting safeguarding concerns

The service is still well connected to the local [safeguarding](#) boards and multi-agency panels. 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. We saw evidence of training and development plans for recognising and identifying safeguarding concerns and reporting these to the appropriate safeguarding team at the local council. These are well planned and the training is to the appropriate level.

The service could do more to work with others in reducing the risk of fire and other emergencies

The service doesn't routinely exchange information with relevant organisations about people and groups at greatest risk. It works with some local organisations including housing associations, local councils, Thames Valley Police and South Central Ambulance Service, but they are not always approached when they should be to provide support to individuals identified who need it, for example, from mental health services. The service works with these agencies inconsistently and as a result, it isn't using all available opportunities to prevent fires and other emergencies in its communities.

We found examples of where referrals hadn't been made to other organisations where it would have been expected by the service. Referrals that had been made included to the falls team, to the sensory impairment service for a hearing-impaired device, and to the local service that provides telecare equipment. Proactive working with other organisations has reduced since the last inspection, in part due to COVID-19.

The service is now providing less road safety education

The service has identified road-related safety issues by analysing its incident data and comparing it with Thames Valley Police and South Central Ambulance incident information. But we were told that this doesn't currently direct the approach the service takes to delivering road safety education. A joint project between these services has now come to an end, but it resulted in a bespoke role to provide road safety education. The service should do more to support the local approach that it hopes to take.

The service is tackling fire-setting behaviour

The service has recognised an increasing trend in arson within the county and has worked with Thames Valley Police to manage this. Some of this work had to stop due to COVID-19 and there are now fewer members of staff skilled in fire-setter intervention. The service should continue to do more to ensure this activity remains effective.

The service is yet to fully evaluate its prevention activity

We found limited evidence that the service evaluates how effective its activity is or makes sure all its communities get equal access to prevention activity that meets their needs. For example, a draft evaluation report has been developed since the last inspection that includes an initial analysis of prevention activity. We were disappointed to find that the service is yet to fully complete this evaluation or implement any changes from its findings. As a result, the service is missing opportunities to improve what it provides to the public.

Protecting the public through fire regulation



Requires improvement (2019: Requires improvement)

Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at protecting the public through fire regulation.

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

Areas for improvement

- The service should make sure that it uses its increased levels of resources to meet the priorities set out in its risk-based inspection programme.
- The service should make sure it has an effective quality assurance process, so staff carry out audits to an appropriate standard.
- The service should review its response to false alarms (called ‘unwanted fire signals’) to ensure operational resources are used effectively.
- 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.

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

The service has done a good job of increasing its number of qualified staff

The service has increased its number of qualified protection staff from 10 in March 2019 to 19 at the time of our inspection. This enables the service to provide the range of audit and enforcement activity needed, both now and in the future.

Staff get the right training and work towards the appropriate accreditation. The service continues to comply with the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#) competency framework for business fire safety advisors. The service should make sure it continues to support the development and direction of this newly established team.

COVID-19 had a limited impact on protection activity

We considered how the service had adapted its protection activity during our COVID-19 specific inspection in November 2020. At that time, we found it had adapted its protection work well. Since then, we are encouraged to find that the service has continued to use some of the new virtual contact methods to carry out inspections and has continued to support staff to develop their abilities in face-to-face audit inspections, completing audits, issuing notices and enforcing action when appropriate.

The service is ahead of schedule to audit all high-rise premises clad with aluminium composite material (ACM)

Audits have been carried out at all high-rise buildings the service has identified as having cladding that is similar to the cladding installed on Grenfell Tower. Information gathered during these audits is made available to response teams and control operators, enabling them to respond more effectively in an emergency.

The service is on track to visit all the high-rise, high-risk buildings it has identified in its service area, both Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, by the end of 2021.

The service provides proportionate enforcement activity and works with others to support its capacity

The service consistently uses its full range of enforcement powers and, when appropriate, prosecutes those who don't comply with fire safety regulations. A specific enforcement and training officer role has been added to the team's structure to support the service in its enforcement activity. In addition, the service works closely with other enforcement agencies to regulate fire safety and routinely exchanges risk information with them. It is actively using the local council's legal support services to follow up on prosecution cases.

In the year to 31 March 2020, the service issued 3 alteration notices, 11 enforcement notices, 13 prohibition notices and undertook 1 prosecution. We were told by the service that it has eleven other prosecution cases pending court dates.

The service is improving its response to building consultations

The service has improved its performance in commenting on fire safety arrangements at new and altered buildings. In the year to the end of March 2020, the service was only able to complete 46.1 percent of the building consultations it received – and it received far fewer that year than in previous years. Encouragingly, the situation has improved throughout 2020, despite the pandemic. The service has been able to respond to 88.6 percent of building consultations within the required timeframe. The service also received a record number of licencing requests in the year ending March 2021 and has responded to 93.5 percent of these within the required timeframe.

The service's protection strategy is not being used to direct its work

The service's protection strategy isn't clearly linked to the risks identified in its IRMP. Although it has a broad protection policy statement, which has been revised in light of the new public safety plan, the protection plan hasn't been reviewed or updated. The protection team have an action plan for the year ahead, but some of these actions are not aligned with the strategy, and some do not clearly set out what level of activity will be carried out or how the benefits for the public of this activity will be evaluated.

Protection activity generally happens in isolation rather than across the whole service. It appears that operational staff don't conduct any protection activity unless they are in a specific role within the specialist protection team. The staff survey conducted for the service by an external consultant in February 2020 identified the need to better

establish ways of working across the service's different departments. Information isn't always and accurately shared between the service's protection, prevention and response functions.

It is unclear how the service aligns its activity to risk

The service has recently reviewed its risk-based inspection programme, but this has not yet been implemented. We were told that the service plans to pilot this revised programme for three months from July 2021 and will then allocate resources according to the findings of the pilot.

The service has no set target for the number of high-risk premises it must audit. Staff told us that they are unclear about which activities to prioritise, with the result that some high-risk premises may not receive the protection activity they need.

The number of audits conducted in the year ending March 2020 was 267. This is a reduction from the previous year in which 360 audits were conducted. We were told that the new risk-based inspection programme has identified 1,458 premises for inspection from June 2021. Of these, 8 percent of visits are already complete. We are concerned that the service hasn't completed its review of the risk-based inspection programme before determining the resources it needs.

The service needs to do more to adopt quality-assurance to its activity and to raise the quality of its audits

We reviewed a range of audits of different premises throughout the service. This included audits as part of the service's risk-based inspection programme after fires at premises where fire safety legislation applies, where enforcement action had been taken, and at high-rise, high-risk buildings. Not all of the audits we reviewed were completed in a consistent and systematic way.

Only limited quality assurance of the service's protection activity takes place. The process relies on verbal discussions about audit findings and activity. We were told that this conversational approach is supportive for developing protection officers, but it is recognised that it doesn't provide consistency across a geographically dispersed and separated team.

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

The service has increased the ways in which it works with businesses to help them understand and comply with fire safety legislation

The service now has designated team members for working with businesses and has increased its activity with large organisations. An example of this is that it organised a Thames Valley online information seminar for the region's care home organisations. This service could still do more to engage with local businesses and other organisations to promote compliance with fire safety legislation. And it needs to better co-ordinate and monitor the effect its activity has to understand how it reduces risk.

The service has made no progress in reducing its attendance at false alarms ('unwanted fire signals')

The service has continued to respond to all automatic fire alarm activations – in the year ending March 2021, 2,890 false alarms had been attended, which means that 39 percent of the service's activity was taken up in responding to false alarms. This means that engines may be unavailable 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 roads to respond to these incidents.

We are disappointed that the service has made no change to this policy and therefore has made no progress in addressing the area for improvement identified in 2019. As such, the area for improvement remains.

Responding to fires and other emergencies



Good (2019: Requires improvement)

Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service is good 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 within their areas.

In the year to 31 December 2020, the service responded to 7,458 incidents. This equates to 9.17 incidents per 1,000 population, which is comparable to the England rate of 9.39 over the same period. As of March 2021, the service had 19 fire stations and 30 fire engines, as well as 2 swift water rescue boat teams and four [urban search and rescue](#) vehicles. Its public safety plan (2020–25) identifies that it intends to maintain these.

We have graded the service's response to fires and other emergencies as good, but we still have concerns that the approach the service takes to maintain this unique operational model has negative impacts for its overall availability (both wholetime and on-call fire engines) and its productivity in prevention and protection.

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 of its fire engines can be sufficiently resourced, if required.
- The service should make sure 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.

The service's response plan takes a unique and innovative approach

The service's response plan is linked to the risks it identifies in its public safety plan. The extensive research conducted to develop its unique resourcing model is regularly reviewed through the strategic management board. Its fire engines and other vehicles and response staff, as well as its working patterns, are designed and located to enable the service to respond flexibly to fires and other emergencies with the appropriate resources. The service states that on 99 percent of occasions it will need 12 or fewer fire engines to respond to daily demand. The service maintains 18 additional flexible resilience fire engines to support the service's response for the 1 percent of occasions when it may need more.

The service meets its immediate availability standard

The service aims to have 12 fire engines ready for immediate use to cover its daily demand. Additional 'when needed' crews are available on 'delayed turnout' of 20 minutes, 60 minutes or up to three hours. These can be called on to respond to incidents or provide cover arrangements. This is known as the second, third and fourth lines of availability.

The service reports that 99 percent of the time, it has had (at least) the 12 fire engines immediately available that it needs to respond to daily demand. Therefore, the service consistently meets that standard and this has improved since our first inspection. It is due to this improvement in immediate response that the previous area for improvement has been closed.

The service meets national response standards of performance

Home Office data shows that in the year to 31 March 2020, the average (mean) time that it took the service to attend a [primary fire](#) was 9 minutes and 41 seconds. This is in line with the national average for services that include both rural and urban areas.

We reported in our round one inspection that the service's approach to reporting attendance times could theoretically lead to an increase in its response times. In actuality, the service has seen a reduction in its average response time in the year ending March 2021.

The service's overall availability is negatively affected by its low on-call figures

In the year to 31 March 2020, the service's overall fire engine availability was 47.1 percent, which is very low compared to other services. While its 12 wholetime crewed fire engines were almost always available, its additional 18 on-call fire engines were only available 24.3 percent of the time.

We are not satisfied that the service has a plan to maintain the long-term viability of its additional 18 resilience fire engines. It is unclear why the service needs so many additional fire engines when its daily demand pattern is consistently met with 12 available fire engines. The service continues to see a reduction in its [on-call staff](#) and has no plans to address this trend.

The service has good command of incidents

The service has trained incident commanders who are assessed regularly and appropriately. Incident command is standardised via documentation in the incident command pack and by uploading decision logs to a central point so that command officers can be provided with continuing support through learning reviews and training days. As part of our inspection, we reviewed the service's recently implemented Learning Review Command reports, which were comprehensive and shared throughout the service. This allowed the service to recently identify a training need relating to the incident command pack, and it quickly implemented a plan to improve the problem. This process enables the service to safely, assertively and effectively manage the whole range of incidents that it could face, from small and routine ones to complex multi-agency incidents.

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

The service has a positive relationship with Thames Valley Fire Control

We were pleased to see that the service's control staff are integrated into the service's command, training, exercise, debrief and assurance activity. Thames Valley Fire Control is a joint [control room](#) for Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Royal Berkshire fire and rescue services. Staff in control described a positive relationship with Buckinghamshire FRS, including involvement in regular assurance meetings and invitations to attend debriefs and learn from incidents.

The service has established an agreement throughout the Thames Valley Fire Services to [mobilise](#) across borders, making sure that the quickest fire engine is always sent, no matter where the incident occurs. This has a positive effect on Thames Valley Fire Control, which is able to deploy resources promptly and effectively.

Thames Valley Fire Control is developing its ability to handle fire survival guidance calls

The control room staff were confident they could provide fire survival guidance to many callers simultaneously. This was identified as learning for fire services after the Grenfell Tower fire. Staff interviewed described recent training exercises and the use of its back-up control systems to support multiple fire survival guidance calls should this type of incident occur.

Control has good systems in place via Airwave radio and it is trialling video calling, which they described as being predominantly promoted by Buckinghamshire FRS, to exchange real-time risk information with incident commanders, other responding partners and other supporting fire and rescue services. Maintaining good situational awareness enables the service to communicate effectively with the public, providing them with accurate and tailored advice.

The service maintains and regularly updates information about risk to firefighters

We sampled a range of risk information cards and logs on the service's centrally co-ordinated database, including what is in place for firefighters responding to incidents at high-risk, high-rise buildings and what information is held by fire control.

The information we reviewed was in the main detailed and had recently been updated. For example, the service provides recent photographic, mapped and written information about these sites, which is then quickly refreshed on the [mobile data terminals](#) used on the ground at incidents. Staff reported that the system is easily accessed and understood, but that there are sometimes inconsistencies in the quality of some site data.

The service intends to integrate information for response, prevention and protection into one accessible system so that all potential risk information, including that of medical cylinder use or short-term domestic risks, is available to all staff.

The service is good at evaluating its operational performance and is aligning with [national operational guidance](#)

As part of the inspection, we reviewed a range of emergency incidents and training events. These included a multi-agency incident on the railway, a single domestic dwelling incident, an incident at a commercial property, and a training exercise within a high-rise building.

We were pleased to see the service routinely follows its policies to assure itself that staff command incidents in line with operational guidance. Internal risk information is updated with the information received. The service collates operational learning into an operational assurance newsletter and other documentation that is shared throughout the service and mandatory for all staff to read. The quarterly strategic performance monitoring board reviews operational learning and shares this regularly with the [fire authority](#). This information is exchanged with other interested bodies such as South Central Ambulance Service and Thames Valley Police.

The service has responded to learning from incidents to improve its service for the public. For example, we were told about an information leaflet that can be provided to members of the public who have assisted at traumatic incidents and that includes information about support for what they have witnessed. The service also uses the LRF warning and informing group to make sure standardised and appropriate messaging is communicated in the event of a major incident.

We were encouraged to see that the service is contributing towards, and acting on, learning from other fire and rescue services and operational learning gathered from other emergency service partners. The service undertook a comprehensive gap analysis to ensure service policy aligns with national operational guidance. The service has also jointly implemented the Thames Valley Action Plan for the Grenfell Tower Inquiry recommendations; active use of nationally recognised declaration of tactical modes; and a recently reviewed incident policy for marauding terrorist attacks developed by the Thames Valley resilience forum.

The ways in which the service keeps the public informed are inconsistent

The service relies on the LRF systems to inform the public about ongoing incidents and help keep them safe during and after incidents. It does provide communication training to incident commanders and makes efforts to use social media platforms such as Twitter and its external website to update the public about some ongoing incidents. It has links with local radio and press to provide information when appropriate. This needs to be applied consistently across all incidents and platforms to provide information to the public about incidents, exercises and safety concerns.

Responding to major and multi-agency incidents



Good (2019: Good)

Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service is good 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).

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

The service is well prepared for major and multi-agency incidents

The service has effectively anticipated and considered the reasonably foreseeable risks and threats it may face. These risks are listed in both local and national risk registers as part of its integrated risk management planning. For example, the service identifies major infrastructure projects such as HS2, the impact of flooding, cyber security and the risk of attacks on technology, both in its own risk assessments and as part of the LRF.

It is also familiar with the significant risks that could be faced by neighbouring fire and rescue services that it might reasonably be asked to respond to in an emergency. It is good that the service has standardised its predetermined response for high-rise buildings throughout the three Thames Valley Fire Services. Firefighters have access to risk information from neighbouring services via the fire engine mobile data terminals, control mobilising software and [Resilience Direct](#). The service shares risk information up to 10 km across borders via an agreed and centralised email-sharing system, and that it is looking to align the three Thames Valley mobile data terminals to improve interoperability.

The service has a good ability to respond to major and multi-agency incidents

We reviewed the arrangements for responding to different major incidents, including flooding, high-rise and a specific multi-agency railway incident. The service has good arrangements in place, which are well understood by staff. For example, the service has routine and regular planned exercises for a variety of incident types including mass casualty, mass evacuation, wildfire and flooding.

We were able to follow up on our review of how the service responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. The service continues to play a vital role in the support of its local health services and co-ordination of vaccination centres. The service's continuing support of these is highly commendable.

The service works well with other fire services

The service supports other fire and rescue services in responding to emergency incidents. For example, the service has specially trained [national inter-agency liaison officers](#), which are a shared resource to support the Thames Valley region. It also has an urban search and rescue unit, and specialist tactical advisors available for deployment locally and nationally. It 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 assets, such as its urban search and rescue capability and swift water rescue capability.

The service works well with other partners

The service has good arrangements in place to respond to emergencies with other partners that make up the Thames Valley LRF. These arrangements include the continuing development and nurturing of the relationships between the agencies so that in the event of a major or multi-agency incident the service knows who will take on what role. This was evident in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and during the flood of December 2020.

The service is a valued partner and is an active member in many of the LRF's working groups, including training, communications, mass casualty, and the warning and informing group. 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. Prior to COVID-19, the service took part in a flu pandemic tabletop exercise with LRF partners. Staff described the partnership as very strong.

The service has a well-established cross-border exercise plan

The service has a cross-border exercise plan with neighbouring fire and rescue services so that they can work together effectively to keep the public safe. The plan includes the risks of major events at which the service could foreseeably provide support or request assistance from neighbouring services, such as at Silverstone Circuit or Pinewood Studios. We were encouraged to see that feedback from these exercises is used to inform risk information and service plans.

The three Thames Valley services meet regularly and review and align their procedures, equipment and practices wherever possible. They recently undertook a joint training exercise at the Fire Service College and are awaiting an independent evaluation of their command structures and shared polices. The shared control room means that the nearest fire engine to an incident is mobilised first and the three services often jointly respond to incidents across their borders, using their aligned equipment and fire engines.

The service has adopted JESIP

The incident commanders we interviewed had been trained in and were familiar with the JESIP.

The service could provide us with strong evidence that it consistently follows these principles. This includes the service recently testing staff on their knowledge to identify if further learning was required, and the operational assurance team attending incidents to monitor and assure application of the principles. JESIP is included in all levels of incident command courses, from a level 1 e-learning awareness package to level 4 multi-agency gold incident command (MAGIC).

The service listens to and applies learning from national incidents and practices

The service keeps itself up-to-date with joint operational learning updates from other fire services and [national operational learning](#) from other 'blue light' partners, such as the police force and ambulance trusts. This learning is used to inform planning assumptions that have been made with other partners.

Efficiency



How efficient is the service at keeping people safe and secure?



Requires improvement

Summary

An efficient fire and rescue service will manage its budget and use its resources properly and appropriately. It will align its resources to the risks and priorities identified in its [integrated risk management plan](#). It should try to achieve value for money and keep costs down without compromising public safety. It should make the best possible use of its resources to achieve better outcomes for the public. Plans should be based on robust and realistic assumptions about income and costs. Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service's overall efficiency requires improvement.

The service remains in a similar financial position as it was in our first inspection in 2019. Its lean operational response model, combined with an increase in capacity, has addressed our previous cause of concern. The service maintains its 12 immediately available fire engines on nearly all occasions; this is a significant improvement from our first inspection.

However, the response model is supported by spending from its [reserves](#). The service hopes that its income will increase in the future, but it is not sufficiently addressing its current shortfalls to effectively allocate resource to risk. This gives us concerns about whether the service's model, and in particular its 18 additional resilience fire engines, are long-lasting over time.

This model is having negative effects on staff throughout the service. Staff are working hard to do what they can within the resources they have, but some teams are overstretched and aren't getting the support they need to do their work effectively, improve their processes, increase productivity and develop their careers.

These concerns are acknowledged by the service, but the lack of a clear plan for improving this situation is leading to staff feeling frustrated and to low productivity in its statutory functions of prevention and protection. The service needs to improve this situation by setting clear priorities for what it wants to achieve with the resources it has

to make the best use of them. It should also do more to use its existing collaborations and explore new opportunities.

Making best use of resources



Requires improvement (2019: 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 those resources to meet the services' risks and statutory responsibilities. They should make best possible use of their resources to achieve better outcomes for the public.

The service knows its main financial risks and has developed and delivers a unique demand-risk-led model of operational response. The service's budget for 2020/21 is £28.1 million. This is a 3.3 percent increase from the previous financial year.

Areas for improvement

- The service should have effective measures in place to assure itself that its workforce is productive, that their time is used as efficiently and effectively as possible and in a more joined up way to meet the priorities in the IRMP.
- The service should actively seek further collaboration opportunities with other Thames Valley fire services, to achieve value for money and better outcomes for the public.

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

The service plans to deal flexibly with its immediate financial difficulty

Since our previous inspection, the service has worked hard to address the cause of concern and increase its capacity to meet its IRMP. The service conducted a consultation with the public about its financial situation before publication of the latest version of this plan. Although there has been a slight increase in the service's income, it has been able to make additional financial savings. It has reallocated this resource to significantly increase its protection team, recruit more firefighters and provide additional resource to its prevention team.

The service sometimes uses its resources well to manage risk, but there are still weaknesses that need addressing. For example, it is positive that the service has carried out a [zero-based budgeting](#) exercise (where all expenditure has to be justified, rather than assuming that previous spending should continue); this has enabled it to recruit additional apprentice firefighters and staff within its prevention and protection teams. The service's response model is still reliant on the use of some overtime and a formalised 'bank shift' system (a secondary contract to work as and when there is a

shortage in the service), which allows flexibility for the service but presents challenges and requires significant resources to manage. Currently the use of 'bank shifts' and maintaining the availability of fire engines is managed by a team of six support staff and [watch](#) managers.

The service's plans, including allocating resources to prevention, protection and response activities, aren't consistent with the limited risks and priorities identified in the IRMP. For example, the service needs to identify those most at risk from fire in order to better target activity at those most vulnerable.

The service's immediate financial plans are built on sound scenario planning. They help make sure it endures in the short term and are underpinned by financial controls that reduce the risk of misusing public money. The service has recently introduced a financial plan that lays out scenarios based on possible changes to future income and anticipated increases in expenditure. These scenarios help the service to plan and understand how it will meet its short-term gaps in funding.

The service could do more to increase its productivity and improve its ways of working

We were encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since the last inspection to the appraisal of individuals. We are pleased to see that the arrangements for managing performance clearly link individual development to the service's most important aims. Managers reported having had training in the personal development review process and most staff reported having positive conversations with their line managers to support individual performance. Staff don't fully understand how their individual performance contributes to the strategic direction.

The service has considered and implemented new ways of working. For example, it has introduced a 'flexi firefighter contract', which enables staff to work a more flexible shift pattern. The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated changes to working practices, which are being incorporated into the service's 'business as usual'. These include supporting staff whose roles allow them to work from home or at other remote locations by providing the technology to easily access systems and processes.

The service should do more to make sure its workforce is as productive as possible in all work areas. For example, we heard that operational staff do limited prevention and protection activity and that there are areas where the service has manual processes that could be automated. Staff felt unsure of what to prioritise, how much work there was overall, and what more they could be doing to contribute towards the service's overall outputs and to address the needs of the community. Prevention and protection priorities are not clearly understood and it is difficult for staff to be confident that they are focusing their activities in the areas where they will add most value.

The service relies heavily on its 'bank shift'. On average, 25 to 30 percent of the response model is made up of staff carrying out 'bank shifts'. It is dependent on its workforce completing these 'bank shifts' to maintain its 12 immediately available fire engines.

The service collaborates when possible

We are pleased to see that the service meets its statutory duty to collaborate and routinely considers opportunities to collaborate with other emergency responders. It continues to collaborate on joint purchasing, and told us that the three Thames Valley fire and rescue services are to collaborate on the procurement of breathing apparatus equipment, aligning the services' response and operations models.

The Blue Light Hub became occupied by the three emergency services (Buckinghamshire FRS, Thames Valley Police and South Central Ambulance Service) during the pandemic which has encouraged joint activity. The service is looking to further collaboration through this project. The service is also working on its upcoming wide area network/local area network (WAN/LAN) upgrade in collaboration with the local council and NHS.

Throughout the pandemic, the service has been significant in co-ordinating, leading and delivering activity including vaccination and test centres, and food parcel collection and delivery, and has been ready and willing to provide drivers to the South Central Ambulance Service. The service is looking to continue this collaborative approach beyond the pandemic recovery and hopes to continue to have several staff become qualified in both firefighting operations and a basic level of paramedic response.

Though we are satisfied that the service monitors, reviews and evaluates the benefits and results of its collaborations, this is sometimes limited in scope. The service has identified areas from which it can learn and from which it has made savings, such as in the joint Thames Valley Control room, but it doesn't always apply this learning to improve its decision-making. The Blue Light Hub currently has unoccupied space and the project is currently forecast to overspend. The service explained that the learning from the recent development of its headquarters site identified the need for more space for its staff. But as this has not yet been implemented, the additional floor at the Blue Light Hub remains unoccupied and the service has yet to benefit from its additional investment. The service should continue to actively seek collaboration opportunities with other fire services to achieve value for money and better results for the public.

The service has good continuity arrangements

The service continues to have good continuity arrangements in place for areas where threats and risks are considered high. These threats and risks are regularly reviewed and tested so that staff are aware of the arrangements and their associated responsibilities. The service's flu pandemic plans were detailed enough that it was able to provide an initial robust response. It reviewed these plans during the COVID-19 pandemic and has updated them during the recovery phase.

Thames Valley Control have robust and regularly tested business continuity arrangements in place in case of disruption, cyber-attack or a major incident requiring multiple fire survival guidance calls or a national response.

The service shows sound financial management, but it could make improvement in its resource allocation

There are regular reviews to consider all the service's expenditure, including its non-pay costs. And this scrutiny makes sure the service gets value for money. For example, the business case for the WAN/LAN essential upgrade was challenged at both the senior management board and [fire authority](#) board. The service has 'growth and saving' bid processes twice a year to make sure its spending is within the limits of the IRMP.

The service's current financial position means that some of its departments have reduced significantly. This is having a disproportionate impact on performance within these areas. We heard that staff feel under pressure and that they need additional resources to be able to provide the best service possible to the public.

Staffing of the response model can be a struggle, although improvements have been made, including the recruitment of new apprentices. The service is having to make difficult decisions and it is struggling to provide enough support to its main functions such as prevention and protection, especially skilled and experienced staff. In important areas such as procurement, efficiencies are being made through national initiatives and contracts, but these savings are not large enough to fund the increase in the number of firefighters the service states it needs. The service continues to be creative and do more with less, as is shown by its support during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The service could do more to make sure that important areas, including estates and fleet, are in a position to make efficiency gains. The fleet strategy is due for review in 2022 and the estate strategy is due for review in 2023. The service could be more ambitious in its future plans to make increased savings.

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



Requires improvement (2019: Requires improvement)

Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at making itself 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 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 have a clear and sustainable strategic plan for the use of its reserves, which promotes new ways of working.
- The service needs to make sure that its fleet and estate strategies are regularly reviewed and evaluated to maximise potential efficiencies.

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

The service works hard to continually improve value for money and do more with less

We are encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since the last inspection. It has developed a sound understanding of future financial challenges. It plans to mitigate its main or significant financial risks. The previous area for improvement regarding this has been fully met. It is working hard both at a national and local level to secure an increase in the flexibility of the council tax precept (the share of council tax proceeds allocated to the service). It uses additional grant money wisely to invest in current opportunities.

The underpinning assumptions are relatively robust, realistic and prudent, and take account of the wider external environment and some scenario planning for future spending reductions. These include the cessation of the revenue grants for [urban search and rescue](#) and the impact of pending pension rulings.

We are pleased to see that the service has identified savings and investment opportunities to improve its service to the public or generate further savings. It has conducted a zero-based budgeting exercise to realise savings and will continue to do so regularly in the future. It has also introduced a business transformation and programme management office to maintain the alignment, progress and efficiency of its major change projects.

Reserves are reducing significantly

The service's plan for its reserves is unclear and isn't sustainable. We heard that the service is anticipating that its reserves will reduce from £4.6m to £2.8m over the coming year and these will continue to decrease if the council tax precept doesn't rise. The service has set aside funding for its main business continuity project of upgrading its WAN/LAN infrastructure and to establish a leadership development programme. It also sets aside part of its reserves to continue to fund the shared control room. With a reduction in reserves, it's unlikely that the service can invest in new, large-scale, future capital projects in fleet, estates or technology, such as that seen for the development of the Blue Light Hub.

Fleet and estates are affected by the reducing reserves

The service has fleet and estates strategies, but these don't exploit opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness presented by changes in fleet and estate provision. This is due in part to the service's reduced reserves, which may not allow for investment in future capital projects. The senior management team are yet to review the strategies beyond 2022 and 2023.

The service showed us evidence of the way it is assessing the possible impact on risk of changes in estate and fleet provision or future innovation. It has identified the need to improve or redevelop one of its stations. The local council offered the service the opportunity to relocate to a new site. Through thorough planning and assessment, the service identified that the relocation to this particular site would have a significant impact on response times in the local area, negatively affecting the public in the case of an emergency and it is now seeking an alternative option.

Transformation is stifled by the limited future funding scenario

Although the service has invested in some technological solutions to improve its efficiency, these have not resulted in the savings it may have hoped for. It rarely considers how changes in technology and future innovation can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of its workforce. The business and integrated systems project introduced in 2019 has not delivered on the integration of all systems as intended. We were told that it was successful in reducing workloads and processes in the finance, payroll and HR functions. But neither the upgrade of the premises risk management system nor that for fleet and estates management resulted in all of the anticipated improvements for prevention, protection and response. There is little or no consideration of exploiting such opportunities throughout the service due to financial constraints.

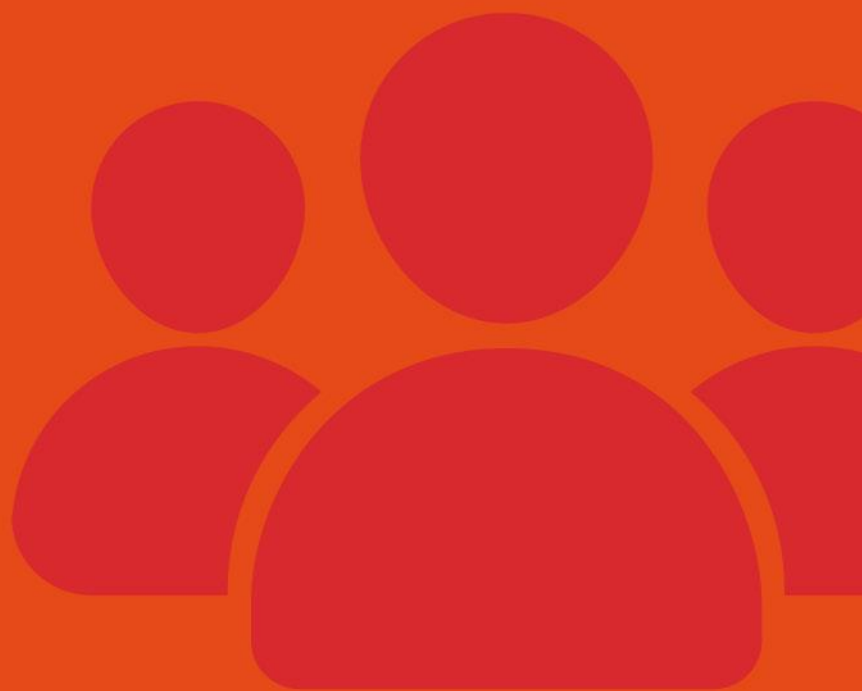
The service has limited capacity and capability to bring about sustainable future change. Although it has previously worked with others to improve efficiency, it is currently struggling to identify opportunities to do more.

The service 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 is limited. It continues to generate an income of £90,000 by renting out its operational drill towers to house mobile phone masts.

The service hasn't been able to secure external funding to invest in improvements to what it provides the public. It intends to develop and invest in the additional space at the Blue Light Hub, but this has yet to be fully realised and incorporated into its funding.

People



How well does the service look after its people?



Requires improvement

Summary

A well-led fire and rescue service develops and maintains a workforce that is supported, professional, resilient, skilled, flexible and diverse. The service's leaders should be positive role models, and this should be reflected in the behaviour of staff at all levels. All staff should feel supported and be given opportunities to develop. Equality, diversity and inclusion is embedded in everything the service does and its staff understand their role in promoting it. Overall, Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at looking after its people.

Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service's staff are committed to their work and are proud to work for the service. The service's values are well defined and well understood and it did a good job of working with its staff during the pandemic. Despite this, there are some areas where it needs to improve.

We acknowledge that the service has fewer available opportunities for staff progression compared to other bigger services, but staff feel frustrated that prospects for developing their career and being promoted are limited. Some feel that their workloads are too great and are unsure about whether the service has any plans to deal with this in the future.

Equality, diversity and inclusion doesn't appear to be a priority for the service. Its policies and action plans in this area are limited and it relies on its staff to keep themselves informed and resolve issues locally. It needs to do more to engage with both its equality, diversity and inclusion working group and with external networks to inform this area. It should particularly focus on its promotions process and how it develops future leaders. Accordingly, our assessment of this area has dropped from 'good' in our previous report to 'requires improvement'.

Promoting the right values and culture



Requires improvement (2019: Good)

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. Health and safety should be effectively promoted, and staff should have access to a range of wellbeing support that can be tailored to their individual needs.

The service could do more to ensure a positive and inclusive culture for all staff. Accordingly, our assessment of this area has dropped from good since our first inspection.

Areas for improvement

- The service should assure itself that senior managers are visible and demonstrate service values through their behaviours.
- The service should make sure that it effectively communicates its absence/attendance procedures for consistent application.

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

The service has clearly defined values, but these are not always demonstrated

The service continues to have well-defined values that are understood by most staff. Work is underway to communicate how the new national [Code of Ethics](#) aligns with the service's current values. Staff told us that they were proud to work for the service and do all they can to keep communities safe under difficult circumstances.

The service adapted its plan for working with its staff during the pandemic and this was well received. Virtual communication and weekly newsletters kept the service well involved. Staff reported that senior leaders have become less visible since face-to-face station visits and the chief's birthday forums had to stop during the pandemic. The service should continue to adapt its communications to respond to the changing environment and use all available methods.

We are not certain that the culture of the organisation always aligns with its values. Some behaviours we saw or were told about didn't meet the service's stated expectations. For example, some staff reported managers not taking action to tackle poor behaviour. The staff survey results also showed that 30.8 percent of respondents felt that senior leaders don't consistently model the service's values.

The workforce's wellbeing, both mental and physical health, is supported by the service, but requires review to fully meet the needs of its staff

The service continues to have well understood wellbeing policies that are available to staff. A significant range of wellbeing support is available to support both physical and mental health. For example, an employee assistance programme is widely promoted for use at any time by any employee to support problems outside work that might affect their wellbeing. The service has trained members of staff in mental health first aid. Staff can access a range of support via its occupational health team, but staff said this does not always meet individual staff needs.

There are good provisions in place to promote staff wellbeing. This includes a dedicated welfare officer, about whom we heard overwhelmingly positive feedback. Most staff reported they understand and have confidence in the wellbeing support processes available. Of those who responded to our staff survey, 96.6 percent reported that they are able to access support services for their mental health and 93.1 percent of respondents said they felt confident that the service would provide support following an incident.

Line managers could do more to involve the workforce and to understand what else they need to support the individual needs of staff, as there has been no review or change to the internal support staff can access, such as employee networks. Of the staff who responded to the staff survey, 31.5 percent said they had either never or only once in the last year spoken with their line manager about their personal health and wellbeing.

There is a positive health and safety culture within the service

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 conducted with staff were positive about the health and safety culture within the service. The service has a health and safety management board that is attended by a representative of the [fire authority](#). Reviews of the information that supports the health and safety culture take place regularly.

Policies and procedures are readily available and effectively promoted to all staff. It is pleasing that of those who responded to the staff survey, 97.3 percent said that they feel their personal safety and welfare is treated seriously at work. Additionally, 74.1 percent agreed that they have access to the time and equipment needed to maintain operational fitness. The representative bodies for the service also reported that the service provides a supportive approach to health, safety and wellbeing for staff. Both staff and representative bodies have confidence in the health and safety approach taken by the service. The service needs to continue to monitor secondary contracts (staff taking on extra shifts or other work) and lone working to further limit breaches of the working time directive. They also need to consider the implications this may have on staff.

Absence is not consistently managed within the service

As part of our inspection, we reviewed some case files to consider how the service manages and supports staff through absence. The service has an absence policy, but it isn't widely understood by all staff and managers. From the files we reviewed, the policy wasn't always followed – for example, there were instances when the service's absence triggers had been met but no follow-up action or discussion was shown in the return to work log.

The service has an intensive support process for employees on long-term absence, which is managed centrally. This has several positive impacts on the service's employees.

Overall, the service has seen a slight increase in staff absences over the last 12 months. Many of the additional absences were linked to COVID-19. The service should make sure that it effectively communicates all of its absence processes to managers so that they are consistently applied.

Getting the right people with the right skills



Requires improvement (2019: Good)

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

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

The service could do more in this area and accordingly, the grade has dropped from good since our first inspection.

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 role.

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

The service needs to do more to ensure its future workforce planning

There was very little time for this service to implement change between publication of our first inspection report and the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The service has made some progress in developing its succession plan beyond 2020, given the area for improvement identified in 2019. The service should not be too cautious in its approach and should put in place an achievable succession plan for the whole organisation so that it has effective arrangements to implement its IRMP.

The service currently models the number of staff due to retire and assumes there will be additional leavers in the year ahead. It is positive that the service supports promotions and secondments externally from the service, but recent moves have left gaps in capability that now need internal staff to be upskilled. Temporary promotions are used appropriately to fill short-term resourcing gaps. But more is needed by the service to improve how it considers future needs and undertakes succession planning.

The service has a positive learning and improvement culture, but could do more to make sure all staff receive necessary training

A culture of continuous improvement is promoted throughout the service and staff are encouraged to learn and develop. For example, all protection team members and two of the prevention department have been encouraged to complete the level 3 (and above in some cases) qualification in fire safety.

We are pleased to see that the service has a range of training resources in place. These include practical and e-learning-based theory development for incident command, [safeguarding](#) and other main areas.

Although learning and development is provided by the service for many areas of its work, it doesn't always meet the needs of staff or indeed the service. For example, there is no 'in-house' IT training available to staff for existing or new software and computer use. The service relies on project or departmental managers to implement training on new systems and technological processes, which can result in staff completing forms and processes inconsistently. Training in prevention, management of staff absence, resolving workforce concerns, equality, diversity and inclusion and completion of site-specific risk information could be improved.

The service has a focus on risk-critical training, but could do more to make sure it continues to have the right capabilities to carry out the integrated risk management plan

Risk-critical training is given a high enough priority by the service. Staff training is monitored via an electronic system that ensures that annual validation of main skills in operational firefighting is effective and up-to-date. The service identifies training-themed months throughout the year to support operational learning and development. This allows staff to undertake their operational roles effectively and for the service to actively monitor immediate shortages in specialist skills. The service has robust measures in place to temporarily remove staff – those who have not demonstrated the required level of competence – from risk-critical roles, affording them time to retrain, develop and be re-assessed.

The service is aware of a current shortage in competent emergency response drivers, incident commanders and some staff are waiting to validate their breathing apparatus competency, which can have a negative effect on fire engine availability and need constant staffing changes.

Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity



Requires improvement (2019: Good)

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

Creating a more representative workforce will provide huge benefits for fire and rescue services. This includes greater access to talent and different ways of thinking, and improved understanding of and engagement with their local communities. Each service should make sure that equality, diversity and inclusion are firmly embedded and understood across the organisation. This includes successfully taking steps to remove inequality and making progress to improve fairness, diversity and inclusion at all levels within the service. It should proactively seek and respond to feedback from staff and make sure any action taken is meaningful.

Cause of concern

The service hasn't made enough progress since the last inspection to improve equality, diversity and inclusion.

Recommendation

By 31 January 2022, the service should:

- give greater priority to how it increases awareness of equality, diversity and inclusion across the organisation;
- make sure 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;
- ensure it has robust processes in place to undertake equality impact assessments, implement and review any actions required; and
- be more ambitious in its efforts to attract a more diverse workforce which 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.

The service seeks staff feedback, but it does not always act on this to make positive changes

Although the service does have some means of gathering staff feedback, they are inconsistent and not wide-ranging. For example, representative bodies and staff associations reported that they would like to see improvements in the way in which the service works with them, and there is an opportunity for the service to better promote challenge from the workforce. Also, the return rate from [on-call](#) staff to the staff survey was much lower than we had hoped for, despite the service promoting it to them. This suggests that the service needs to find other ways to work with on-call staff.

Staff have limited confidence in the service's staff survey feedback mechanism and don't think this is effective. There was a mixture of feelings from the staff we interviewed about the impact that the service's own culture survey of 2020 had on improving the service. The survey received a 77 percent return rate from which it could take positive and meaningful challenge. The survey identified main points for improvement within the service, but progress on these has been interrupted due to COVID-19, and we saw no evidence that implementation of action plans was being monitored centrally to make sure improvements are made.

The service needs to improve its approach to equality, diversity and inclusion

The service hasn't made enough progress to improve its approach to equality, diversity and inclusion. The service's understanding of the diversity of its workforce is insufficient to formulate an effective diversity plan. The current policy and associated action plan for this doesn't focus on effectively gathering workforce information, training and development or staff support opportunities, and the monitoring of improvements and developments in this area is limited. The service relies on its staff keeping themselves informed about issues and concerns about inclusion and leaves issues to be dealt with locally. The equality, diversity and inclusion group could have better alignment with strategic management and does not provide enough opportunity to seek the views and feedback from the service's under-represented groups.

Although the service has a form to use in equality impact assessments, the effect on each of the protected characteristics wasn't being properly assessed or actioned. More could be done to work with both the internal equality, diversity and inclusion working group and external networks to inform this. The service has a consultation process for developing policies, process and practices, but the equality impact assessment may not be reviewed by those with a specialist knowledge of equality principles, which could lead to the service not making appropriate changes. For example, we were informed that some stations do not have gender-appropriate facilities and staff weren't aware of plans to change this. Many of the completed equality impact assessments we reviewed identified few or no impacts with regard to protected characteristics.

The service needs to improve its approach to recruitment

More still needs to be done by the service to increase staff diversity. According to Home Office data, since 2017/18, 6.7 percent of new joiners self-declared as being from a black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) group and 23.2 percent have been female. According to the service's data, for firefighter apprenticeship recruitment specifically, 14.6 percent of all new apprentices were women, while 93.5 percent declared they were from a white background – the remaining 6.5 percent didn't declare an ethnicity and no apprentices self-declared as BAME. In relation to the service's entire workforce, 4.4 percent are BAME and 19 percent are women. While the service has made some progress in recruiting more women via its apprenticeship scheme, this is only a marginal change and so the area for improvement identified in 2019 remains.

Recruitment campaigns aren't always directed at or accessible to under-represented groups and the service's approach isn't leading to changes in this area that would increase the diversity of its workforce. For example, the service has used various radio advertisement opportunities and holds 'have a go days', but these have not greatly increased the numbers applying to the service and there is no evaluation of the effectiveness of these approaches. The service could do more to understand all the available opportunities it has to actively promote its vacancies and recruit a more diverse workforce. Our staff survey showed that 29.4 percent (43 of 146) feel that the service is not effective in ensuring that recruitment processes are fair and accessible.

The service has made some progress to promote fairness in its internal promotion and progression processes

In the short time since our previous inspection, the service has put considerable effort into developing its internal operational promotion and progression processes for some levels of the service. These processes are well understood by staff, who see the selection board process for promoting operational staff to middle management as fair.

The promotion and recruitment policies are comprehensive and cover opportunities to develop into operational roles. Staff reported wanting this process to be applied throughout the service to all roles and opportunities, including support staff. Our staff survey showed that 54.1 percent (79 of 146) of those who responded don't agree that the promotion process in the service is fair.

The service needs to do more to make sure its internal promotion processes are fair for all roles. The current process for promotion only covers operational roles from firefighter to station manager. We were unable to assess whether the policies had been followed in the recent promotion process for station manager to group manager or group manager to area manager. The service should evaluate this process to make sure all staff involved are receiving feedback as per the guidance and it is seen as a fair process by all staff.

The service could do more to make sure that its policies for tackling bullying, harassment and discrimination are being followed

Although the service does have clear policies and procedures in place, staff have limited confidence in the service's ability to deal effectively with all cases of bullying, harassment, discrimination, grievances and discipline. In the staff survey conducted during our inspection in 2021, 89.4 percent of staff who reported feelings of bullying, harassment or discrimination felt either unable to report the situation or that little had changed resulting from the report they made. The service does not routinely collect information from exit interviews. These would allow the service to gather significant information that could help it to better understand how to retain staff – this is currently a problem for the service.

The service could go further to improve staff confidence in the handling of bullying, harassment and discrimination. In our staff survey, 13.7 (20 of 146) percent of staff told us they had been subject to harassment and 18.5 (27 of 146) percent to discrimination over the past 12 months. Of these staff, only 10.6 percent thought their concerns had been properly dealt with by the service and the majority of these respondents identified someone more senior than them as being the cause of the bullying, harassment or discrimination. A more consistent approach could be taken to providing continuing training in these areas.

Managing performance and developing leaders



Requires improvement (2019: 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 high-potential staff and improving diversity in 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.

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

The service has introduced a good process for managing individuals' performance

There is a good performance management system in place, which allows the service to effectively develop and assess the individual performance of most staff. Staff felt confident in the performance review arrangements. For example, the revised personal development review (PDR) reflects the service's corporate plan. It was well understood throughout the service and most staff reported having completed the process with their line manager within the last 12 months. Home Office data shows that the number of staff with a completed PDR has increased each year up to 2020/21, when 60 percent of [wholetime](#) staff completed a PDR, in comparison to just 43 percent in the year 2019/20. This is a significant improvement, but we heard from some staff that they felt the continuation of any positive results and support of this process were dependent on their line manager's involvement with it.

Through our staff survey, it is positive that 94.5 percent of staff reported that they have received regular discussions with their manager, but only 69.7 percent said that these were meaningful. Staff informed us that they have individual goals and objectives, and regular assessments of performance.

The service should do more to develop leaders and high-potential staff at all levels

The service needs to improve how it actively manages the career pathways of staff, including those with specialist skills for leadership roles. We are concerned about the process not being fairly applied throughout the whole workforce.

The service has some talent management schemes in place to develop leaders and high-potential staff, such as project roles, shadowing and development centres, but they aren't managed in a way that is open or fair for all levels of the service. For example, 54.1 percent of responses in the staff survey said the processes for promotion are unfair and 41.8 percent said that they didn't feel as though they received the same level of opportunity to develop as others. This has resulted in inconsistency and undermines staff perception of fairness in the process.

The service is considering putting in place more formal arrangements to support members of staff to become leaders, based on guidance from the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#) on leadership. We reviewed a business case for the implementation of leadership and management training for all middle and senior managers and concluded that the service could still do more to be clear about how it identifies and supports those with high potential. As such, the area for improvement grade is still appropriate.

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