

Approval date: 16 March 2022



**Statement of Assurance
2020/2021**

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1. INTRODUCTION

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

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

1.2 The purpose of this document is to provide the public and Government with assurance that Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority ('The Authority') met the requirements set out in the National Framework and accompanying Government guidance¹ during the 2020/21 financial year.

1.3 Where relevant, the document draws on, consolidates and summarises the findings of existing assurance processes relating to financial, governance and operational matters that were set up to meet other statutory and regulatory requirements of fire and rescue authorities.

1.4 During the year, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS):

1.4.1 Carried out an assessment of the effectiveness of the Service's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings from this are summarised in section 6 of this Statement;

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

1.4..2 Advised that the second formal inspection of fire and rescue services provided by the Authority would be brought forward to May / June 2021, following transfer of the Service from tranche three to tranche one of the inspection cycle. The first inspection was carried out in summer 2019. An overview of the findings from the first inspection by HMICFRS are set out at section 6 of this document.

2. FINANCIAL ASSURANCE

2.1 It is a statutory requirement under the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 for authorities to publish the financial results of their activities for the year. This 'Statement of Accounts', shows the annual costs of providing the Service and is determined by a Code of Practice which aims to give a "true and fair" view of the financial position and transactions of the authority.

2.2 The audited annual financial statements for the Year Ending 31 March 2021 can be accessed via this hyperlink:
[\[Link to holding statement pending completion of audit: Audit of Final Accounts 2020/21 - Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service\]](#)

2.3 The financial statements are required to be audited under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014. The auditors are responsible for:

- forming an opinion on the financial statements;
- reviewing the Annual Governance Statement;
- forming a conclusion on the arrangements that the Authority has in place to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.

2.4 In the auditor's opinion the financial statements:

- Gave a true and fair view of the financial position of Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority as at 31 March 2021 and of its expenditure and income for the year then ended; and,
- have been prepared properly in accordance with the CIPFA/LASAAC Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom 2019/20. [\[Link to holding statement pending completion of audit: Audit of Accounts 2020/21 - Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service \(see page xx\)\]](#).

2.5 Regarding the requirement to consider whether the Authority has put in place ‘proper arrangements’ to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources – known as the ‘value for money conclusion’ - the auditors, in their Audit Planning Report, did not identify any risks of significant weaknesses against the three reporting criteria of financial sustainability, governance and improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

The detailed results and conclusions from the appointed external auditors audit process can be found in the Audit Results Report for the year ended 31 March 2021:

[[Link to holding statement pending completion of audit: Audit of Accounts 2020/21 - Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service](#) (see page xx)].

2.6 The Authority is required to report annually on progress against the financial strategy 2020/21-2024/25 which was approved by the Fire Authority in December 2020. The financial strategy is the link between the organisation’s long-term service objectives and its financial capacity. It also helps organisations to consider the feasibility of different options in terms of affordability and financial sustainability. A year one update will be provided to the Fire Authority in December 2021.

2.7 The Authority’s internal auditors also produce an annual report on the internal control environment. In this report, the Chief Internal Auditor stated that:

*“Based on the audit work undertaken, our experience and knowledge of previous years’ performance and the current climate in which the Authority is operating, in my opinion the system of internal control provides **reasonable assurance** regarding the effective, efficient and economic exercise of the Authority’s functions. However, our work has identified further enhancements that are required to ensure that the internal control framework remains adequate and effective. Findings raised from the 2020/21 internal audit reviews have not identified any material weaknesses. Overall, the Fire Authority has continued to demonstrate a robust and effective internal control and risk management environment.”*

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

<https://bucksfire.gov.uk/documents/2021/07/oa-item-9-210721.pdf/>

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

[Authority Expenditure Over £500 - Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service](#)

3. GOVERNANCE

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

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

Principle B Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement.

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

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

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

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

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

3.3 There is already a statutory requirement for the Authority to produce an annual governance statement to demonstrate and evidence that it operates an effective system of internal control. The internal control systems underlying the annual governance statement are assessed by Internal Audit to ensure that they are adequate and effective so that:

- The Authority can establish the extent to which they can rely on the whole system; and,
- Individual managers can establish the reliability of the systems and controls for which they are responsible.

3.4 Details of the Authority's governance arrangements and the internal auditor's findings in relation to these (summarised at paragraph 2.7 above) can be found in the Annual Governance Statement 2020/2021: <https://bucksfire.gov.uk/documents/2021/08/annual-governance-statement-2020-21.pdf/>

3.5 The Annual Governance Statement also confirms that the Authority met its statutory obligation to review its Pay Policy Statement annually. This sets out its policies on the remuneration of its chief officers, the remuneration of its lowest paid employees and the relationship between the remuneration of its chief officers and the remuneration of its employees who are not chief officers. This was approved and adopted by the Authority at its February 2021 meeting, and can be viewed via the following link to the Authority's website: <https://bucksfire.gov.uk/documents/2021/02/item-9-pay-policy.pdf/>

4. OPERATIONAL ASSURANCE

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

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

Statutory Duties and Operational Effectiveness

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

- The Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004;
- The Civil Contingencies Act 2004;
- The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005;
- The Fire and Rescue Services (Emergencies) (England) Order 2007;
- The Localism Act 2011;
- The Fire and Rescue National Framework for England;
- Policing and Crime Act 2017.

4.2 In 2016 the Authority reviewed its approach to assuring operational effectiveness and developed a new operational assurance model to help identify and meet known 'best practice' requirements. A fundamental part of the assurance process was the Authority's three-year contractual agreement with Operational Assurance Limited (OAL), a specialist, external provider. This agreement ensures the Service's risk critical operations are subject to regular independent scrutiny, thereby strengthening the Authority's ability to deliver the best possible public service and improve the safety of Firefighters by: improving our performance at incidents; coping with future changes in the operational environment; and, driving development and innovation. The first of two planned OAL reviews took place during November 2018, focusing on the following key topic areas:

- management of site-specific risk information;
- operational discretion; and,
- the refined Operational Assurance model

4.3 In their report on the findings of the review, OAL identified 26 improvement recommendations.

A report on progress against the initial recommendations was presented to the November 2019 Overview and Audit Committee meeting (see pages 81 – 84 of the linked document):

https://bucksfire.gov.uk/documents/2020/03/overview_and_audit_committee_agenda_and_reports_201119-min.pdf/

4.4 The second OAL operational review, took place in November 2019, focusing on High Rise Procedures and Command Support. As a consequence of the visit, specific areas of improvement were identified that culminated in 14 recommendations being made. The recommendations were either marked as being ‘Advisory’, where OAL felt that positive management action in this area may be required, or ‘Suggested’, where OAL recommend that management undertake a review of the issue identified. The 14 recommendations were made up as follows: (x9) Advisory, (x5) Suggested:

<https://bucksfire.gov.uk/documents/2020/07/item-19-operational-assurance-improvement-plan.pdf/>

4.5 Progress against the remaining OAL recommendations, together with other requirements identified during the year was reported to the 17 March 2021 Overview and Audit Committee meeting:

<https://bucksfire.gov.uk/documents/2021/03/oa-item-14.pdf/>

4.6 Independent, external assurance of the Service’s operational performance is now provided by HMICFRS via the [effectiveness pillar](#) of their inspection framework.

4.7 The Service’s dedicated Operational Assurance Team continue to monitor and review performance at operational incidents as well as coordinate any information that is shared through National Operational Learning (NOL), Joint Organisational Learning (JOL) through the Joint Emergency Services

Interoperability Principles (JESIP) as well as relevant findings from HMICFRS inspections.

5. INTEGRATED RISK MANAGEMENT PLANNING

- 5.1 The National Framework requires that Fire Authorities must produce an Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) that identifies and assesses all foreseeable fire and rescue related risks that could affect its community, including those of a cross-border, multi-authority and / or national nature. The plan must have regard to the community risk registers produced by Local Resilience Forums and any other local risk analyses as appropriate. Each fire and rescue authority integrated IRMP must:
- be easily accessible and publicly available; and,
 - reflect effective consultation throughout its development and at all review stages with the community, its workforce and representative bodies, and partners.
- 5.2 The Government guidance relating to statements of assurance requires that they should include details of IRMP consultations and, in particular, that appropriate information was provided to enable active and informed participation.
- 5.3 Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority regularly reviews the fire and rescue related risks to the community it serves and updates its IRMP in response to any material changes to the nature and level of the risks identified and assessed.
- 5.4 The Authority's current IRMP, known as the '2020-25 Public Safety Plan', is published on its website. This sets out the Authority's strategy for achieving its vision of making *'Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes the safest areas in England in which to live, work and travel'*:
https://bucksfire.gov.uk/documents/2020/03/public_safety_plan_2020_to_2025.pdf/
- 5.5 The plan was approved by Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority on 12 February 2020 following the outcomes of a public consultation which took place between 23 September and 18 November

2019. The consultation process embraced key stakeholder groups including the general public, Authority staff, neighbouring fire and rescue services and a range of other organisations with a potential interest in the development of the plan. It also included the use of qualitative consultation methods via focus groups which encourage participants to reflect in depth about their priorities for the Authority while both receiving and questioning background information and discussing service delivery issues in detail. Full details of the consultation process and its outcomes are available on the Authority's website:

https://bucksfire.gov.uk/documents/2020/03/item_7d_2020-25_psp_5_feb_20_executive_cmte_cover_paper_annexes-min-2.pdf/

The Authority has also established a framework of key performance indicators and measures to help it assess progress towards the achievement of its vision. Performance in relation to these is reported to the Authority's Overview and Audit Committee on a regular basis whose role is to scrutinise any areas of under-performance together with proposals for corrective action. A report on performance outcomes for 2020/21 against the framework of indicators and measures can be viewed on the Authority's website by following this link:

<https://bucksfire.gov.uk/documents/2021/10/oa-item-14-17-10-21.pdf/>

6. HMICFRS INSPECTION

The 'HMICFRS' published the findings from its inspection of the Service on 17 December 2019:

https://bucksfire.gov.uk/documents/2020/03/230120_item_7_hmicfrs_cover_report_23012020_appendix-min.pdf/

The report identified 11 areas for improvement and one cause of concern accompanied by two recommendations. The Fire and Rescue Service National Framework requires fire and rescue services to give due regard to HMICFRS reports and recommendations. Where recommendations are made, the receiving Service is required to prepare, update and regularly publish an action plan detailing how such recommendations are actioned (Fire and Rescue National Framework, section 7.5).

The Service's Action Plan was published and approved by the Authority at its 12 February 2020 meeting where it was also agreed that progress against the Action Plan be reported regularly to the Overview and Audit Committee. The most

recent progress update for the 2020/21 financial year was reported to the 17 March 2021 Overview and Audit Committee meeting:

<https://bucksfire.gov.uk/documents/2021/03/oa-item-13.pdf/>

In November 2020, the HMICFRS carried out an inspection of the effectiveness of the Service's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. HMICFRS published COVID-19 inspection reports into all fire and rescue services on 22 January 2021. The report consisted of a letter sent to the Chair of the Fire Authority and the Chief Fire Officer. HMICFRS judged that the Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service *"...responded well during the pandemic and provided additional support to its community. It used wholetime and on-call firefighters to respond to emergencies. Staff supported the service's partners, especially the local ambulance trust. This meant the people of Buckinghamshire were well supported through the pandemic"*.

The full report on the findings from the inspection can be viewed here:

<https://bucksfire.gov.uk/documents/2021/03/oa-item-13.pdf/>

7. MUTUAL AID, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL RESILIENCE

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

- Its active participation in the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum which comprises other Category 1 and 2 responders. The forum maintains a community risk register which the Authority considers as part of its integrated risk management planning process;
- Review of the National Risk Register, National Risk Assessment and National Resilience Planning Assumptions which are maintained by the UK Government Cabinet Office to inform planning in relation to major civil emergencies of a national or regional nature;
- Mutual aid agreements with neighbouring fire and rescue authorities which enable authorities to provide each other with additional resources to deal with emergencies that cannot be dealt with by an authority acting alone. Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority maintains formal mutual aid agreements with

all six of its neighbours – Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, London, Royal Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Northamptonshire.

- Working with South Central Ambulance Service (SCAS) to enhance the level of both medical and trauma care training delivered to operational frontline Firefighters, provide co-responding services to medical emergencies and allowing SCAS crews to use Authority premises.

- 7.2 The Authority maintains specialist assets to enable it to deal with major civil emergencies such as major transport incidents, natural disasters and terrorist incidents. The capabilities, which include Urban Search and Rescue (USAR), Detection, Identification & Monitoring Officers (DIM) and water rescue are available on a local, regional and national scale, and have been deployed in support of other Authorities during major emergencies. The Authority's USAR and water rescue assets are included on the National Asset Register. The National Asset DIM capability is overseen by Oxfordshire FRS, with support from specially trained officers from across the three Thames Valley FRS's.
- 7.3 The Authority also has an established cadre of National Inter-Agency Liaison Officers (NILO) who are trained and qualified officers who can advise and support FRS Incident Commanders, police, medical, military and other government agencies on the FRS's operational capacity and capability to reduce risk and safety resolve incidents at which a FRS attendance may be required.
- 7.4 The Authority collaborates with all the other South East Fire and Rescue Services to jointly fund the post of a NILO who is seconded to the Counter Terrorism Policing South East (CTPSE). This post acts as a focal point for advice to and from the unit.
- 7.5 As a Category 1 responder as defined in the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, business continuity is a high priority for Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority. The Authority has secured a number of employees who work on flexible resilience contracts. These contracts ensure the Authority maintains availability of local, regional and national assets during the full range of foreseeable business continuity events.

- 7.6 At all times we also maintain sufficient numbers of trained USAR staff on duty to provide an initial response to incidents in line with the USAR Concept of Operations. Additionally, we have staff who maintain cover through a recall to duty contract, who deliver our second set of staff as detailed under the USAR Concept of Operations and enable us to maintain operational cover locally if USAR is deployed for an extended period, this includes national exercising. Under their contractual arrangements these staff are required to maintain this cover during periods of industrial action.
- 7.7 The Service remains committed to continued improvement in relation to joint-working between the emergency services and other responders through the adoption of the 'Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles (JESIP). This is supported and delivered by a local structure that includes nominated Strategic, Training and Joint Organisational Learning (JOL) leads.
- 7.8 Operational multi-agency exercises are routinely undertaken, utilising the fire-ground facilities at the Fire Service College with identified learning captured during a facilitated debrief. Any captured learning, along with notable practices originating from exercises or incidents have been entered onto JOL Online, so to ensure that the lessons identified are available to other responder agencies. Furthermore, all operational commanders, along with colleagues from the other Thames Valley fire & rescue services, Thames Valley Police and South Central Ambulance, undergo routine training. This training has been designed to allow delegates the opportunity to demonstrate and apply knowledge of JESIP to any given situation, utilising the Joint Decision Model (JDM) in collaboration with our blue light partners, to help bring together available information, reconcile objectives and make effective decisions.
- 7.9 All activities relating to JESIP are included within the embedding self-assessment questionnaire, submitted every quarter to the JESIP team, which is intended to provide assurance that JESIP is being embedded with the Service.
- 7.10 Since 3 April 2017 section 2 of the Policing and Crime Act 2017 has placed a duty on the Authority to keep opportunities for collaboration with the police and ambulance services under review. Where two or more of the emergency services consider it would be in the interests of their efficiency or

effectiveness to collaborate, there then arises a duty to enter into a collaboration agreement.

7.11 A Thames Valley Emergency Services Collaboration Executive Board was established in 2017, comprised of the Chief Fire Officers from the Thames Valley Fire and Rescue Authorities, the Thames Valley Police Deputy Chief Constable and the Chief Executive from South Central Ambulance service, as the forum to determine collaboration opportunities and enter collaboration agreements.

7.12 Following the move to a jointly funded Thames Valley Fire Control Service (TVFCS) in April 2015, the Authority has continued its commitment to collaboration through a Thames Valley Operational Alignment Programme. Amongst other things, the programme sets out to align:

7.12.1 Operational Alignment - Equipment, procedures, training and practice across the region. The key benefits are improved interoperability, enhanced resilience, a reduction in cross border mobilisations and maximised Best Value through collaborative contract negotiation and joint procurement. An example is the jointly procured red fleet replacement, which has standardised the frontline fire appliances and equipment across the Thames Valley. More recently all three services have formally committed to procuring the same Breathing Apparatus set as part of a 10-year contract, these joint initiatives have and will continue to generate significant savings for the public purse;

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

7.13 In February 2020, the Service invoked its Pandemic Response Plan following the entry of Covid-19 into the UK. A pandemic management group was established with a priority to maintain core service activity and safeguard the health, safety and wellbeing of all staff. Activity included provision of

appropriate operational and service level guidance, amending day to day activities and routines, and provision of appropriate additional PPE.

In addition to maintaining our core functions, the Service provided support to the coordinated response as a partner within the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum. This included assistance with logistics for supply of PPE to frontline workers, delivery of essential items and food packages to vulnerable people, training healthcare staff in the use of additional PPE and seconding staff to South Central Ambulance Service to drive ambulances. As the test and trace programme gathered momentum, the Service also provided support on the ground with surge testing and to follow up on cases where the telephone service had not made contact.

Support continued into 2021, most notably by the Service providing logistical and managerial support to mass vaccination centres. This support commenced from the outset of the mass vaccination programme, where we helped establish four mass vaccination centres across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. The operation has resulted in thousands of people within the communities we serve being able to receive their coronavirus vaccinations, and we are very proud to be part of that.

DECLARATION

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

Jason Thelwell
Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive

Councillor David Carroll
Chairman, Overview and Audit Committee