

Sent by email:

Louise Harrison
Chief Fire Officer
Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service

30 July 2024

Dear Louise,

Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service revisit

Between May and June 2023, we inspected Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service. During our inspection, we identified that the [causes of concern](#) relating to prevention and equality, diversity and inclusion issued after our inspection in 2021 had not been fully addressed. We also identified a new cause of concern about the service's protection activity. On 19 October 2023, we issued the causes of concern and made the following recommendations:

Prevention cause of concern

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

Recommendations

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

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

Protection cause of concern

The service hasn't done enough since our last inspection to address its [areas for improvement](#) and provide clear direction to make sure that its teams can prioritise work according to risk.

Recommendations

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

- clearly defines its risk-based inspection programme, within a revised protection strategy, which is aligned to its next public safety plan;
- makes sure its increased number of staff complete a proportionate amount of activity to reduce risk and work to effective targets;
- assures the system to record fire safety activity is robust and well supported to enable prioritisation of highest risk;
- makes sure it has an effective quality assurance process so that staff carry out audits to an appropriate standard.

Equality, diversity and inclusion cause of concern

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

Recommendations

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

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

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

Between 20 and 24 May 2024, we carried out a revisit to review progress against the action plan. During the revisit, we interviewed staff who were responsible for developing this plan, including you as chief fire officer. We also interviewed managers and staff with responsibility for prevention, protection and equality, diversity and inclusion, together with colleagues from their teams. On 31 May 2024, we shared our initial findings with you. This letter provides an update on our findings.

Governance

We found appropriate and robust governance arrangements in place to monitor progress of your action plan. You, as chief fire officer, chair the His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) strategic improvement board meetings, which have been held regularly since December 2023. This board provides strategic oversight and scrutiny of the action plan and the service's progress. Partner organisations such as the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#), Buckinghamshire Council, HMICFRS and representative bodies attend these meetings.

You also introduced the HMICFRS tactical board in early 2024 to make sure departmental managers are monitoring progress. This board also meets regularly and is chaired by the deputy chief fire officer.

Action plan

The service has an action plan that covers all the causes of concern. The plan identifies senior responsible officers, deadlines and people assigned to each task. It includes updates on the progress of actions made against each cause of concern and the associated recommendations. The service is also considering its progress against the areas for improvement we identified in our last inspection. It should continue to do this to make sure improvements are not made in isolation and are inclusive of the wider service.

The service now has a dashboard that shows how many of its actions have been completed, are in progress or are at risk. This helps it to focus on what actions need attention. It also means the service can provide accurate progress reports at the HMICFRS strategic and tactical improvement board meetings.

Progress against the causes of concern

Prevention

The service has made good progress against the remaining recommendations associated with the cause of concern. It has improved the way it identifies and prioritises those most at risk of fire and other emergencies.

The service has developed and published its risk stratification methodology. This means all referrals for home fire safety visits can be scored against a risk criterion and then prioritised for completion within set timescales.

It has updated and thoroughly tested its system for managing referrals and home fire safety visits using this risk methodology. It now makes sure referrals are quickly triaged, added to the system and prioritised for a visit by staff. Referrals are now prioritised on a highest-risk basis rather than on a first-come, first-served basis.

The service has given in-person training and guidance documents to staff who are involved in the administration process for home fire safety referrals. It plans to roll this out to all firefighters and staff involved with processing referrals.

The service has developed a dashboard to monitor the number of referrals it has received and triaged, how many still require action and how many home fire safety visits are waiting to happen. During our revisit, the service was able to identify the number of homes waiting for a visit and how long they had been waiting. It has significantly reduced the number of cases in its backlog.

The service is developing key performance indicators to help it effectively manage these changes and the impact they will have on its performance and on the public. We look forward to seeing the outcome of these changes and the service's performance updates.

Protection

The service has made progress in improving how its teams prioritise risk. It has used support from the National Fire Chiefs Council and other fire and rescue services to help it review its ways of working.

The service has reviewed its protection strategy and developed a risk-based intervention methodology. This should help the service to make sure its teams are prioritising fire safety audits for high-risk buildings.

It has increased its target for fire safety audits completed each month. Since September 2023, the service has considerably increased the number of audits it has made each month. The service has identified and made a list of very high-risk premises that should be prioritised for annual audit, which it has made available to protection staff.

The service has trained protection staff on its recording system to make sure data input is consistent. It has also identified and introduced the need for additional administrative support so that staff have more time to carry out audits.

The service has formalised its quality assurance procedures and has completed the first round of quality assurance recording for protection staff.

It is developing performance indicators, which will help it to make sure it continually targets high-risk premises. The service also has plans to automate some processes to create consistency and further increase productivity.

The service needs to do more to make sure this new approach, developed through its strategy and quality assurance guidance, is fully understood by all staff. It should consider whether further updates to its systems are needed to make sure its record keeping is accurate.

Equality, diversity and inclusion

The service has made good progress to improve the way it promotes equality, diversity and inclusion. Working closely with Buckinghamshire Council, it has reviewed its action plan and used this external expertise to scrutinise its activity.

The service has worked with staff to review and redefine its values. It has asked staff to develop their own personal goals, keeping in mind the service's redefined values.

It sought funding so that it could recruit a people and culture officer and a director of human resources and organisational development. These two roles will help the service to focus on its work on equality, diversity and inclusion and make sure it is co-ordinated across the service's departments.

The service has included an equality, diversity and inclusion objective into personal development reviews for all staff. This should help the service to continually raise awareness of equality, diversity and inclusion topics, both locally and organisationally.

It has carried out a positive action recruitment campaign. This has helped the service to increase the number of applications from women and people from an ethnic minority background.

The service has ambitious plans to further promote equality, diversity and inclusion. We look forward to seeing this promising work continue.

Conclusion

We were pleased to see the significant steps the service has taken in response to the causes of concern we issued. Despite good progress being made, there is still more work to do. While the action plan is comprehensive, we can't yet determine how effective the plan will be in making sure it provides a better service to the public.

We will continue to monitor the service's progress through regular contact and attendance at its improvement boards. And we will carry out an in-person visit to examine the outcome of the changes the service has made. We will assess whether Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service has made satisfactory progress with its action plan and if the service it provides to the public has improved.

This letter will be published on our website.

Yours sincerely,



Roy Wilsher OBE QFSM

His Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary

His Majesty's Inspector of Fire and Rescue Services