

# Fire & Rescue Service 2021/22

## Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of Avon Fire and Rescue Service



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# About this inspection

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This is our third inspection of fire and rescue services across England. We first inspected Avon Fire and Rescue Service in July 2018, publishing a report with our findings in December 2018 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.

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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 Avon 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
 <b>Effectiveness</b>	 <b>Requires improvement</b>	<b>Requires improvement</b>
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	Inadequate
Responding to fires and other emergencies	 Good	Requires improvement
Responding to major and multi-agency incidents	 Good	Good

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

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

## HMI summary

It was a pleasure to revisit Avon Fire and Rescue Service. I am grateful for the positive and constructive way that the service engaged with our inspection. I want to thank the service for working with us by accommodating a mostly virtual approach to this inspection. These inspections would normally be conducted using a hybrid approach, but inspecting against the backdrop of the pandemic meant we had to inspect more activity virtually. I also want to recognise the disruption caused by the pandemic. This has been considered in our findings.

In our last inspection, we identified three causes of concern. We are very pleased with the progress the service has made since to address these. It produced a robust action plan for resolving each cause of concern and has detailed the progress made against each area for improvement. I am delighted that I can now discharge the three causes of concern we found in our 2018 inspection.

Avon Fire and Rescue Service has made significant investments in its protection function. The service has seen this investment pay off. It has been able to more than double the number of staff working in protection and has enough resources to work on its highest risk premises.

We are very encouraged that the senior leadership team is now more visible to staff. The service consulted its workforce on its new values and behaviours framework, which is widely understood and accepted. It has also invested in provisions to support the physical and mental health of its staff, including dedicated outdoors wellbeing spaces.

In this inspection, we identified no further causes of concern. But there are several areas for improvement. The service needs to improve the way it gathers and maintains risk information to make sure firefighters have access to up-to-date and useful information that will help them in their work. And we found that some staff haven't had the training they need to do their jobs. This means that they aren't carrying out their roles with the right support.

The service's IT infrastructure is out of date, which affects how well – how effectively and flexibly – staff can do their jobs. Rightly, the service recognises this deficit and is investing in new infrastructure as part of its transformation programme.

Overall, I am very pleased with the progress the service has made. The challenge now is for the service to keep up this momentum in making further improvements to make the people of Avon safer.



**Wendy Williams**

HM Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

# Service in numbers



## Response

Avon

England

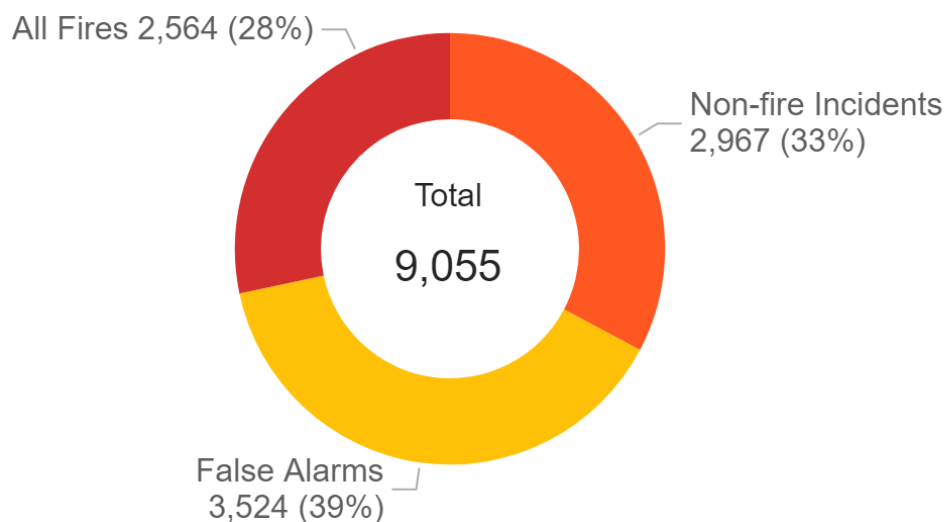
Incidents attended per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2021	7.77	9.16
Home fire safety checks carried out by fire and rescue service per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2021	2.61	4.47
Fire safety audits per 100 known premises Year ending 31 March 2020	2.18	2.55
Average availability of pumps Year ending 31 March 2020	90.22%	83.07%



## Cost

Firefighter cost per person per year Year ending 31 March 2020	£23.74	£23.82
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### Incidents attended in the year to 31 March 2021

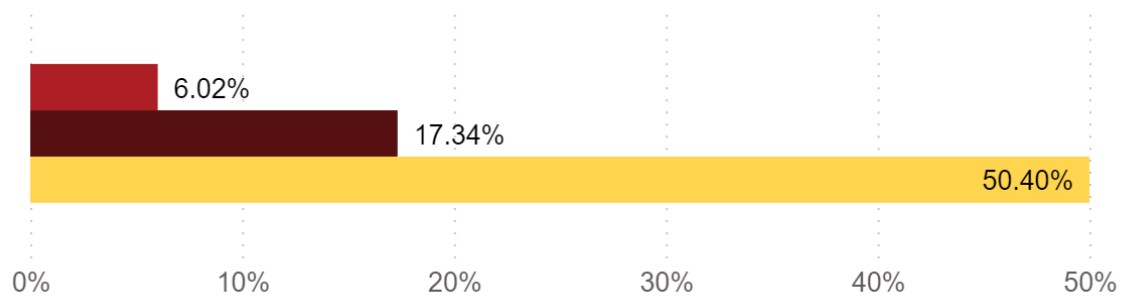




Five-year change in total workforce 2015 to 2020	-6.19%	-5.30%
Number of firefighters per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2020	0.60	0.63
Percentage of firefighters who are wholetime Year ending 31 March 2020	68.64%	65.10%

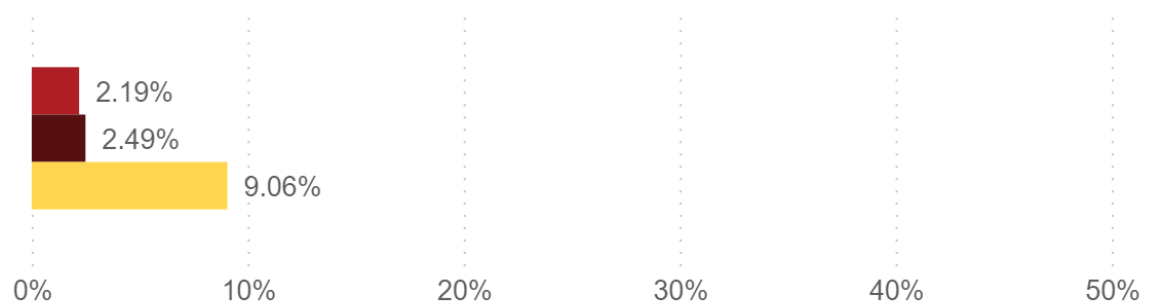
### Percentage population, firefighters and workforce who are female as at 31 March 2020

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

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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. Avon Fire and Rescue Service's overall effectiveness requires improvement.

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We are pleased with the progress that Avon Fire and Rescue Service has made in terms of its effectiveness in keeping people in its service area safe and secure. In 2018, we had a cause of concern about the lack of resources in the protection function. It has made good investments in this area. We were pleased to see that the service has changed its staffing model and, as a result, has been able to more than double the number of staff in that team. It now has enough qualified staff to meet the requirements of its risk-based inspection programme (RBIP).

It has also made investments in other areas like progressing the service's compliance with the [national operational guidance](#). It is experimenting with new staffing models to address crewing shortages in on-call stations and has increased response availability.

The service has published its own response standard. This is now based on risk, rather than more general factors like population density, and sets targets for its own response times to emergencies. We found that it is currently meeting the standards it has set itself, and its overall response availability is consistently high. The service is also well prepared for major incidents.

There are still areas which need to improve. The service gathers data regularly and has access to a range of data sets. But it doesn't use this effectively. For example, the way it gathers and maintains risk information should be improved. And the service needs to make sure that lessons from operational activities are learned by

all firefighters. Nonetheless, we were pleased with the improvements we found in this latest inspection.

## Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies



### Requires improvement (2018: Good)

Avon 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 should make sure it gathers and records relevant and up-to-date risk information to help protect firefighters, the public and property during an emergency.
- The service should make sure staff are trained in how to carry out and identify site-specific risk information.

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

#### The service doesn't use the data it collects well

While the service has a range of data sets available to it, we found that it doesn't effectively use this data to support its prevention, protection and response activities. For example, the service has station plans which outline its priorities for each local area, but staff told us that these don't drive their day-to-day activities and the data is rarely used.

The service has assessed an appropriate range of risks and threats as part of its service planning process. It carried out risk profiling and an analysis of incident data to develop its strategic assessment for 2021. When assessing risk, it has considered relevant information collected from a broad range of internal and external sources and data sets. For example, it has used census data and demographic information from the Office for National Statistics. The service used a limited amount of data from its partner organisations (including local authorities and other emergency services) when creating the service plan.

When appropriate, the service has had constructive discussions with its communities and others. For example, the service took part in two BBC radio interviews to promote the service plan. It held five public consultation events and distributed more than 600 information cards. The service also engaged with the public at places such as shopping centres, and with its staff and representative bodies.

However, the service could do more to engage with less well-engaged groups such as Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities during the consultation process. The service carried out visits to some community groups. But these visits were not structured or targeted, and the service didn't evaluate whether this approach was effective.

### **The service has an effective service plan for 2021–24**

After assessing the relevant risks, the service has recorded its findings in an easily understood service plan. This describes how it will resource its prevention, protection and response activity to mitigate or reduce the risks and threats the community faces, both now and in the future. For example, the plan details how [home fire safety visits \(HFSVs\)](#) will target the most [vulnerable people](#) in the community.

The plan also describes the service's achievements in the last 12 months. For example, it has introduced [on-call](#) support officers to provide tailored support for on-call stations. As a result, the service has seen an improvement in staff availability at these stations. This is encouraging to see, as it means that the more rural parts of the service area have greater resilience.

The service plan is updated each year. The service has effective measures in place to check how well the plan is being implemented and to regularly review it. The service provides information to the public about its performance in the previous 12 months, like its average response times and the number of fires that have occurred in the service area.

### **The way the service identifies, gathers and maintains risk information must be improved**

The service collects risk information about the people, places and threats it has identified as being the highest risk, but the information we reviewed was limited, inaccurate or not up to date.

In our previous inspection, we evaluated the way that the service gathers and disseminates risk information about temporary events as an area for improvement. The service has now introduced a process to notify staff of temporary events. The information is uploaded onto the station calendar and the workforce receives a communication about the event. Staff told us that this process is effective.

The service recognises that its processes for identifying, gathering and maintaining risk information could be improved. We are not confident that the service has identified all the premises that require a site-specific risk information (SSRI) record. An SSRI is used to gather information such as the hazards and the risks associated in premises, to assist response crews in the event of an emergency. The inspection team sampled SSRI records. We found:

- four of the five high-rise records sampled had no risk information about the premises; and
- most of the records sampled on the [mobile data terminal](#) in the fire engine were a few years past the point when they should have been reviewed, even though

firefighters told us they had recently visited and collected risk information for the sampled premises.

We found that [fire control](#) staff aren't always aware of the evacuation strategies for the high-rise premises in the service area. This will affect the quality of the information provided to residents in these buildings in the event of a fire. The service should make sure that it has identified all the premises that require an SSRI record and that they are up to date.

We were surprised to find that the mobile data terminal that firefighters rely on for risk information is only updated once a month. This is because it is a manual process. This means firefighters do not always have prompt access to the most up-to-date information they need to keep the public, and themselves, safe.

Furthermore, staff are not trained in how to carry out an SSRI, and the quality assurance of this process is limited.

### **The service learns from national incidents**

The service has a process in place to disseminate lessons from national operational and [joint organisational learning](#). The risk intelligence team distributes any learning to the workforce via bulletins and email.

The service has also assisted in [national operational learning](#). For example, the service discovered that security teams in a large property management company didn't routinely have access to the buildings they were guarding. This prevented firefighters from getting quick access to those buildings in the event of an emergency. Following feedback to the company, it changed its policy and security teams now have access to the buildings. This learning has been provided to other fire and rescue services nationally.

We found that, although operational debriefs do occur, most staff could not recall any learning following local incidents or training exercises.

### **The service has responded well to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry**

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

Avon Fire and Rescue Service has taken steps to respond to this tragedy. It has produced an action plan which details how it intends to implement the recommendations from the inquiry. It has identified one high-rise building with cladding, like that at Grenfell Tower, and is working with the local authority and the responsible person for the building. The cladding is now being removed.

Information gathered during this audit is made available to response teams and fire control operators, enabling them to respond more effectively in an emergency. For example, operational staff have carried out familiarisation visits to this high-rise building. We found limited evidence of prevention activity carried out at the premises but recognise that the service has plans to focus community fire safety activity on high-rise residential buildings with unsafe external wall systems.

## Preventing fires and other risks



### **Requires improvement (2018: Requires improvement)**

Avon 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.

#### **Areas for improvement**

- The service should make sure staff carry out HFSVs and wider prevention activities competently.
- The service should evaluate its prevention work, so it understands what works.

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 a prevention strategy linked to its service plan**

The service's strategy is linked to the prevention risks identified in the service plan. For example, it details how the service intends to introduce new 'people risk software' to better understand the risks that people in the community face.

The service is developing the way it engages with children and young people. One of the aims in the service plan is to develop the schools education programme which includes fire, water, and road safety.

Prevention work doesn't take place in isolation – appropriate information is sent to other relevant teams across the service. This information is used to adjust planning assumptions and direct activity between the service's prevention, protection and response functions.

#### **The prevention team worked effectively during COVID-19**

We considered how the service had adapted its prevention work during our COVID-19-specific inspection in October 2020. At that time, we found the service had adapted its public prevention work appropriately. Since then, we are encouraged to find that the service has cleared most of its HFSV backlog. The service has introduced a new booking system where a central administrator arranges the HFSV on behalf of staff. This allows the staff to focus on carrying out the HFSV without having to spend time on administration. This has improved efficiency.

The service has continued to provide support to the South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust by driving ambulances. It has also provided support to the mass vaccination centres in Bristol and Bath, as well as other local vaccination centres across the service area.

### **More needs to be done to train staff in home fire safety visits and wider prevention work**

The prevention team carries out training for newly appointed firefighters as part of their induction. However, we found that staff who carry out HFSVs and wider prevention activities haven't received the appropriate support to carry these out confidently. This could mean that the benefits of HFSVs provided to vulnerable people to protect them from fire and other emergencies are not maximised as they may not be receiving the fully tailored advice they need.

The quality assurance of prevention activities is limited. At the time of our inspection, the service was developing a new HFSV plan which will review the prevention training requirements for the wider workforce.

### **Prevention campaigns happen in isolation**

The service uses social media to promote prevention campaigns. It also uses the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#) calendar to support seasonal campaigns, although most operational staff that we spoke to didn't follow the calendar.

To support its service plan, the service has created station plans and community risk profiles. We found inconsistencies between local stations in how they select which prevention campaigns to support, and staff told us that the station plans are rarely used to make decisions about what prevention campaigns they should focus on. They told us that the data available to them to identify vulnerable people is outdated and not reliable.

Some operational staff give presentations to key stages 1 and 2 pupils. But they told us they haven't been given the appropriate support to provide these activities – they aren't confident presenting them and the messages are inconsistent. The service has recruited a children and young persons' manager to make sure these activities are consistent.

The service is part of the West of England partnership for road safety initiatives. Before the pandemic, the service carried out a range of activities. For example, it would carry out reconstructions of cutting people free from a vehicle at schools. The service is currently developing a road safety plan.

The service carries out its water safety campaigns well. We found that firefighters we spoke to were involved in providing water safety advice in specific areas. The service supports the Bristol Water Safety Partnership and the Bath River Safety Group.

### **The service doesn't routinely evaluate its prevention activity**

We found limited evidence that the service evaluates how effective its activity is or that it makes sure all its communities get equal access to prevention activity that meets their needs. For example, prevention campaigns are not evaluated to assess their effectiveness or impact. The service does carry out some limited evaluation, such as feedback forms following school visits, but it does not use evaluation of its activities to drive further improvement. As a result, the service is missing opportunities to improve what it provides to the public.

### **The service targets its most vulnerable people for home fire safety visits**

In our previous inspection, one area for improvement was that the service should target its prevention work at the people who are most at risk from fire and other emergencies. We were pleased to see that prevention activity is now clearly prioritised using a risk-based approach. The service has introduced a triage system which is incorporated within the referrals process. This is used to prioritise HFSVs based on the complexity of the vulnerabilities identified. We sampled HFSV records and found that staff were made aware of any identified vulnerabilities before the visit took place. We also found that the HFSVs we sampled were completed in a timely manner.

Staff told us that, after a fire, they carry out HFSVs and hot strikes, (where the service visits the property or specific area to offer HFSV advice). However, from the records we sampled, we didn't find any evidence of this occurring. We also found that limited prevention activities had been carried out at the high-rise premises we sampled.

### **The service is effective at responding to safeguarding concerns**

In our previous inspection, we identified the way the service's staff understand and [safeguard](#) vulnerable people as an area for improvement. We are encouraged to see the service has now trained its staff in how to identify vulnerable people and make safeguarding referrals.

The staff we interviewed told us about occasions when they had identified safeguarding problems. They said they feel confident and trained to act appropriately and promptly. For example, one member of staff made a referral to the community risk reduction team following concerns that someone was hoarding in their home. The referrer received feedback which provided details on the outcome, and the hoarding concerns were shared across the relevant departments.

### **The service works well with a range of partner organisations**

The service works well with a wide range of partner organisations such as the NHS, the British Red Cross, and organisations involved in local housing provision, such as social housing providers, housing associations and charities, to prevent fires and other emergencies. It has over 150 such partner organisations.



The main aim of these collaborations is for HFSV referrals. Since our previous inspection, the service has improved its HFSV referral form. It told us that, in the year to 31 March 2021, around 45 percent of HFSVs were generated through partner referrals. The service has also collaborated by:

- making joint visits with its partner organisations;
- exchanging information with other public sector organisations about people and groups at greatest risk. For example, the service became aware of individuals having financial difficulties because of the pandemic and could refer them to partner organisations to provide advice and support; and
- recognising there was an increase in suicide calls at the Clifton Suspension Bridge in Bristol. Some firefighters requested negotiating skills training, as often they are the first to arrive at the scene. As a result, the charity Suicide Prevention Bristol has recently trained a team of firefighters, which has been well received by those who participated.

### **The service tackles fire-setting behaviour**

The service has a range of suitable and effective interventions to target and educate people of different ages who show signs of fire-setting behaviour. This includes a fire-setters programme, which engages with and educates schoolchildren.

The community safety workers liaise with and visit people at a greater risk of arson. They also fit lockable letter boxes. The service's website informs members of the public about arson prevention.

When appropriate, the service routinely shares information with other partner organisations about fire-setting. The service has fire investigation officers who identify the cause of deliberate fires and provide this information to the police to support the prosecution of arsonists. In the service area, there has been a downward trend in deliberate fires since 2017.

### **Protecting the public through fire regulation**



#### **Requires improvement (2018: Inadequate)**

Avon 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 assure itself that its RBIP prioritises the highest risks and includes proportionate activity to reduce risk.
- The service should make sure it has effective arrangements for providing specialist protection advice out of hours.
- The service should make sure it works with local businesses to share information and expectations on compliance 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 a protection strategy that is linked to its service plan**

The service's strategy includes details about the protection plan. It is clearly linked to the risks identified in its service plan.

The protection plan identifies the service's main priorities, such as reviewing its RBIP to make sure it targets the highest risk premises. It also provides detail on how it intends to use its resources.

### **The service has significantly increased its staff in its business fire safety department since our previous inspection**

We were pleased to see that the service has significantly increased its resources in its business fire safety department. This was highlighted as of a cause of concern in 2018. In our previous inspection, the service had 9.5 full time equivalents in this team. The service has since changed its staffing model, and for the first time has introduced non-operational staff as fire safety inspectors. At the time of our inspection, the service has more than doubled its staff working in this area.

We were encouraged to see that the service now has enough qualified protection staff to meet the requirements of its RBIP. This enables it to provide the range of audit and enforcement activity needed, both now and in the future.

Staff get the right training and work to appropriate accreditation. For example, most are working towards or have achieved their [level 4 diploma in fire safety](#).

### **The service should refine its risk-based inspection programme**

Following our previous inspection, the service has reviewed its RBIP by carrying out [risk modelling](#) to identify its highest risk premises. The service has a local definition of high risk and, at the time of our inspection, it had identified 1,998 premises as high or very high risk.

The service knows that it needs to be better at selecting its highest risk premises for the RBIP. For example, we found some premises which hadn't been inspected in over 10 years, and some which had never been inspected. The service is planning to introduce new software to improve the way it targets its highest-risk premises. All the premises identified in the RBIP should be inspected within a reasonable timeframe.

## **The service adapted its protection activities well during COVID-19**

In our COVID-19-specific inspection in October 2020, we considered how the service had adapted its protection activity. At that time, we found it had done this well. It carried out desktop fire safety audits and focused on care homes and schools.

At the time of our 2021 inspection, the service was planning to physically inspect those premises that received a desktop fire safety audit.

## **The service has been slow to inspect all high-rise premises**

At the time of this inspection, not all high-rise buildings had been inspected. In spring 2020, the Home Office identified 187 premises over 18 metres high in the service area. It provided an additional funding of:

- £166,137 to support implementation of this work; and
- £368,894 to support wider protection work.

The service prioritised those high-rise premises that required a fire safety inspection. We were surprised to find that only 14 high-rise premises had been inspected. This means the service doesn't have all the information it could to help it respond if an incident occurred at one of these buildings. The service knows what it needs to do to address this. We saw the service's plan for how it will accelerate the inspections in the required high-rise premises by the end of 2021, but we were still concerned about our initial finding.

During our review of protection files, we found limited evidence of prevention activity at high-rise premises. This means the service is missing opportunities to engage with residents and offer tailored home fire safety advice.

## **The fire safety audits sampled were completed to a high standard**

We reviewed a range of audits carried out at different premises across the service. This included audits as part of the RBIP; after fires at premises where fire safety legislation applied; where enforcement action had been taken; and at high-rise, high-risk buildings.

Most audits we reviewed were completed to a high standard, in a consistent, systematic way, and in line with the service's policies. All the audits we reviewed were completed within the timescales the service has set itself.

Relevant information from the audits is made available to operational and fire control teams. For example, protection staff came across an issue with a dry riser outlet in a building. (A dry riser outlet is used to distribute water to multiple levels of a building.) The information recorded by the protection staff was passed on to operational and fire control teams.

Protection staff told us that fire safety audits are carried out following a fire. However, in the records of premises we sampled where there had been a fire, none had any fire safety activity recorded afterwards.

## **Quality assurance for fire safety audits is inconsistent**

We found examples where quality assurance had taken place during a fire safety inspection. This was completed in a proportionate way. The service recognises that not all of its staff's work has been quality assured. We spoke to competent protection staff who said their work hadn't been quality assured since joining.

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 uses its enforcement powers well**

The service consistently uses its full range of enforcement powers and, when appropriate, prosecutes those who fail to comply with fire safety regulations. The files sampled showed that the service provides support to the responsible persons but, if necessary, it will enforce its full range of powers.

In the year to 31 March 2020, the service issued:

- no alteration notices;
- 10 enforcement notices; and
- 15 prohibition notices.

It completed four prosecutions between 2016/17 and 2019/20. The service has access to legal counsel who oversee enforcement and prosecution activities. In 2021, they have supported the service in carrying out three successful prosecutions, so far.

## **The service works effectively with its partner agencies**

The service works closely with other enforcement agencies to regulate fire safety, and routinely exchanges risk information with them. It has a protocol with all four local authorities that makes clear which authority will use its powers in which parts of the premises.

The service makes joint enforcement visits. For example, it did a joint initial premises inspection with Bristol City Council. There were serious fire safety failings in the building. The service worked closely with Bristol City Council to make sure the premises was safe.

## **The service has significantly improved its response times to building consultations**

Since our previous inspection, it is encouraging to see the service has significantly improved the way it responds to building consultations. More staff and resources mean it consistently meets its statutory responsibility to comment on fire safety arrangements at new and altered buildings. The building consultations are sent electronically, and an officer is assigned to provide the response. The service has good relationships with the local authorities. If any urgent consultations need to be reviewed, the assigned contact agrees the timescales for the review.

## **The number of unwanted fire signals attended has declined**

In our previous inspection, we identified the way the service addresses unwanted fire signals (false alarms) as an area for improvement. The service has since published a new policy to tackle this issue and has an effective risk-based approach in place. The service has stopped responding to some automatic alarms, but continues to respond to risks to premises where people sleep (like care homes or hotels) and high-risk premises.

We are encouraged to see that it attends fewer unwanted fire signals as a result of this work. In the year to 31 March 2021, the service attended 39.2 percent fewer unwanted fire signals per 1,000 population than in the previous year. Fewer unwanted calls ensure fire engines are available to respond to genuine incidents, and fewer fire engines travelling at high speed on the road reduces the risk to the public.

## **The service works with businesses, but could do more**

The service could do more to engage with local businesses and other organisations to promote compliance with fire safety legislation.

The service held a seminar for business owners for businesses in the Yate area. But this kind of activity is not consistent across the county. The service would benefit from collecting equality data from the designated responsible persons for premises, which may help it to promote fire safety advice to those communities most likely to need it. The service is developing data sets which will help it to work with businesses and premises that are at higher risk.

## **The service doesn't have sufficient 24/7 fire safety cover**

The service's duty rota doesn't make sure that the specialist fire safety knowledge needed for responding to certain fire safety concerns is always available. Outside of office hours, there may be dangerous situations where access to a premises needs to be prohibited or restricted – only a limited number of staff on the rota system have the specialist protection knowledge required to authorise this decision. We expect all services to have the capability to respond to fire safety concerns at all times.

## **Responding to fires and other emergencies**



### **Good (2018: Requires improvement)**

Avon 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.

### **Areas for improvement**

- The service should make sure it has an effective system for learning from operational incidents.
- The service should make sure its operational staff have good access to relevant and up-to-date cross-border risk information.

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

### **The service aligns resources to the risks identified in its service plan**

The service's response strategy is linked to the risks identified in its service plan. Its fire engines and response roles, 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. For example, the service has reintroduced a community first responder vehicle at Thornbury Fire Station, in collaboration with South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust. This allows firefighters from Thornbury to mobilise to category 1 (the most serious) medical emergencies to provide vital lifesaving care before the arrival of ambulance teams.

### **The service introduced a new response standard which is based on risk**

There are no national response standards of performance for the public. Since our last inspection, the service has published its own revised response standard. This has moved away from standards based on population density to those based on risk. There are three categories: emergency critical, emergency non-critical, and non-emergency. The service aims to attend emergency [critical incidents](#) such as house fires within 8 minutes. The service will use an average (mean) for the relevant year to see if it has reached its target. The service told us that its emergency critical response time in 2020/21 was 7 minutes and 16 seconds. This meets its standard.

### **The service's overall response availability is consistently high**

The service hasn't set itself a target for the number of fire engines that need to be available to support its response strategy. Instead, it intends to improve the availability of engines at all fire stations. In 2020/21, the overall availability was 87 percent. The service's fire control staff met their target of answering at least 94 percent of 999 calls within 7 seconds. In 2020/21, the figure was 96 percent.

To support its response strategy, the service published an operational degradation plan, to address how it would deal with not having enough firefighters available. This plan will come into effect when the availability of firefighters on any given shift falls below the minimum required to crew all the service's fire engines.

## **Staff have a good understanding of how to command incidents safely**

The service has trained incident commanders who are assessed appropriately. Each commander has an assessment every two years. This 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. However, we found that incident commanders don't carry out any ongoing training to maintain their competencies in between their two-yearly assessments. The service should make sure incident commanders receive continuous professional development in between the command assessments.

As part of our inspection, we interviewed incident commanders from across the service. We found that they were familiar with risk assessing, decision making and recording information at incidents in line with national best practice, as well as the [joint emergency services interoperability principles \(JESIP\)](#). They feel able to step outside of guidance at operational incidents and that the service will support their decisions.

## **The service has invested in progressing national operational guidance**

In our previous inspection, we identified the way the service intends to adopt national operational guidance as an area for improvement. The service has now completed a gap analysis and adopted and trained staff in some of the guidance, such as the use of breathing apparatus. The service has invested in a dedicated team who will progress the implementation of national operational guidance. The service is working with other fire and rescue services to ensure a consistent approach is applied.

## **The service keeps the public informed about ongoing incidents effectively**

The service has good systems in place to inform the public about ongoing incidents and help keep them safe during and after incidents. This includes:

- using social media and its website;
- arrangements with [local resilience forum \(LRF\)](#) partners to inform the community about ongoing incidents;
- media training for flexible duty officers; and
- social media training for staff who run a service or station social media account.

## **The service is improving the risk information available to firefighters**

In our previous inspection, one area for improvement was that staff weren't confident in accessing risk information on fire engines' mobile data terminals. Encouragingly, most staff spoken to had received the appropriate support and felt confident in navigating these terminals.

In our inspection we sampled a range of risk information, including:

- records on the risk intelligence system; and
- SSRI records on mobile data terminals.

We found that the service doesn't give its staff appropriate support in how to complete an SSRI. Nor does it carry out quality assurance on SSRIs.

Some staff told us the information on the SSRI record is basic, and therefore they don't always refer to it when responding to an incident. This means that firefighters don't have all the relevant information available to them when responding to an emergency.

The service is familiar with some of the significant risks in neighbouring fire and rescue service areas, which it might reasonably be asked to respond to in an emergency. But it has more to do. For example, most staff we spoke to weren't aware of any risk information available to them from adjacent services. The service shares information about cross-border risks and major risks through a national database which flexible duty officers have access to. The service should make sure that all operational staff have access to this information.

The service recognises the information stored on the SSRI records needs to be improved. A business case has been approved to further enhance this area. The service is also working with Bristol City Council to provide detailed computer-aided design plans for high-rise buildings in the Bristol area. At the time of our inspection, these plans were being published and were a significant improvement on what firefighters currently have access to.

### **Fire survival training should be provided to fire control staff**

Control has good systems in place to exchange real-time risk information with incident commanders, other responding partner organisations, and other fire and rescue services. Maintaining good situational awareness helps the service to communicate effectively with the public, providing accurate and tailored advice. It has also taken steps to review its high-rise procedures.

The service hasn't reviewed its ability to provide fire survival guidance to many callers simultaneously, as we would have expected it to. This was identified as learning for fire services after the Grenfell Tower fire. Fire survival training is provided as an initial acquisition, but this competence is not maintained. The service has identified this in its action plan and will be developing this as an ongoing competency.

There is some evidence that fire control staff are involved in the service's command, training, exercise, debrief and assurance activity. But the involvement is usually initiated by control staff and they aren't routinely invited to these activities. This means that fire control staff won't have the opportunity to learn from others or contribute to these sessions.

### **Although operational debriefs occur, the learning is not always used**

In our previous inspection, we identified as an area for improvement the fact that operational staff weren't fully aware of the service's operational debrief process. The service has made progress in this area, but more work is required.

At the time of our inspection, we found that the service had carried out over 300 operational debriefs in the previous 18 months. However, operational staff could only recall limited learning that had taken place from these. Furthermore, firefighters don't have access to the formal debriefs that have occurred. This means that operational staff aren't able to continually learn from operational incidents.



As part of the inspection, we reviewed a range of emergency incidents and training events. We found:

- delays in carrying out some actions following the debrief;
- limited evidence of other agencies being involved in the debrief process; and
- operational assurance officers not always being deployed to incidents involving four fire engines or more, contrary to the service's own policy.

The service should make sure that the debrief process is effective and that lessons learned are accessible and understood by staff.

## Responding to major and multi-agency incidents



### Good (2018: Good)

Avon 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 strategic assessment for 2021. They include severe weather and flooding risks. The service has effective means of declaring a major incident and responding to it. For example, it was instrumental in responding to the Wessex Water explosion, where four people died.

### The service can respond to major and multi-agency incidents

We reviewed the arrangements the service has in place to respond to different major incidents, including ones at the Severn Tunnel, [control of major accident hazard \(COMAH\) sites](#), and other high-risk sites.

The service has good arrangements in place, which are well understood by staff. For example, at the Severn Tunnel, the service holds four major incident exercises each year. This helps staff to familiarise themselves with the arrangements in place, should an emergency response be required. The service has resources to support a major incident, such as a mass decontamination unit, an [urban search and rescue](#) team and a high-volume pump. Staff are clear on when and how to deploy these resources.

### **The service works well with other fire services**

The service supports other fire and rescue services in responding to emergency incidents. For example, in May 2020, the service supported Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service at the major fire in Wareham Forest. The service also supported Cornwall Fire and Rescue Service in providing cover for the G7 conference in 2021, which involved national leaders from across the world. The service has formal agreements for providing support to its neighbouring services. It used these arrangements when tackling the Strachan and Henshaw fire in 2019, with support from Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service. It is intraoperable with these services and can form a part of a multi-agency response.

### **The service would benefit from a structured cross-border exercise programme**

The service carries out exercises with its neighbouring fire and rescue services. However, there is no strategic oversight in place for these, nor for how the learning will be acquired. We would expect to see a consistent approach, as the approach has been inconsistent in different parts of the service area. The service would benefit from having a strategic programme of exercises.

### **The service works well with other emergency services**

The incident commanders we interviewed had been trained in and were familiar with JESIP. The service provided us with strong evidence that it consistently follows these principles. This includes staff having knowledge and use of the joint decision-making model. Staff could also describe the procedures for reporting information on major incidents to relevant government departments.

The service works closely with Avonmouth Docks and carries out joint exercises and training. This helps it prepare better for possible incidents. The service also participates in an annual training exercise with other emergency services, which fire control staff spoke highly of.

### **The service is a valued partner in the local resilience forum**

The service has good arrangements in place to respond to emergencies with other partner organisations that make up the Avon and Somerset LRF.

The service is a valued partner and is represented at the LRF's strategic and tactical co-ordinating groups and subgroups. During the initial stages of the pandemic, the service drove ambulances in emergencies; took patients to outpatient appointments or to receive urgent medical care; and provided training to care home staff.

We were pleased to see the service continuing its support to the South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust in driving ambulances. It has also provided support to the national mass vaccination programme, with marshalling and logistics.

The service keeps itself up to date with national operational learning updates from other fire services, and with joint organisational learning from other blue light partner organisations, such as the police service and ambulance trusts. This is used to inform planning with other partner organisations.

# Efficiency



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



## Requires improvement

### Summary

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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. Avon Fire and Rescue Service's overall efficiency requires improvement.

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We are pleased with the improvements the service has made since our previous inspection in 2018. The service has a good understanding of the financial challenges it may face in the future and has planned for a variety of financial risks. Our previous inspection identified as an area for improvement that the medium-term financial plan was not linked to the service plan, and we are pleased that this has now been addressed. The service scrutinises its spending to make sure it gets value for money, and can make savings and efficiencies without negatively affecting its service to the public. The service has exploited external funding opportunities, including a Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme grant of nearly £1m, which we have noted as good practice.

It has made significant investment in protection staff, as well as other areas such as wellbeing. However, it still regularly has staffing shortages in its control room, and firefighters are often moved to other stations to cover shortfalls. The service has already recruited six new [fire control](#) officers and has firefighter recruitment courses planned for 2022. It is also trialling a new crewing model for some on-call stations to increase response availability.

The service needs to make sure that its IT systems are resilient, reliable, accurate and accessible. There has not been enough historic investment in IT infrastructure, and staff told us that this limits their ability to work flexibly. The service recognises this and is piloting new software and upgrading broadband in stations. The [fire authority](#) has

approved a £1.5m investment in IT, and the service has funded a transformation programme to improve the way it operates through digital technology, which includes improvements to its IT infrastructure.

## Making best use of resources



### Requires improvement (2018: Requires improvement)

Avon 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's budget for 2021/22 is £44.56m. This is a 1.99 percent increase from the previous financial year.

#### Areas for improvement

- The service should have effective measures in place to assure itself that its wholetime workforce is productive and that their time is used as efficiently and effectively as possible to meet the priorities in the service plan.
- The service should assure itself that its IT systems are resilient, reliable, accurate and accessible.

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 plans in place to support its objectives

The service's financial plans reflect and are consistent with the risks and priorities identified in the service plan. This includes the way that it allocates staff to prevention, protection and response. Since our previous inspection, the service has invested significantly in its protection function. It has also invested in other areas of the service such as its wellbeing provisions.

The service plan clearly sets out the resources available within each function. However, firefighters told us they are regularly moved to other stations to cover shortfalls in crewing, and that overtime is frequently used. We were also told that there are regular staffing shortages in the control room, causing the [watch](#) to go below the minimum number of staff required. The service has planned firefighter recruitment courses for 2022. At the time of our inspection, six fire control operators were about to join the service, which will help with the staff shortfalls.

The service is trialling a dual response model for some on-call stations, particularly in the daytime when there are crewing shortages. This is where the crew of a fire engine is made up of firefighters from different on-call stations, who respond simultaneously. This has increased response availability.

The senior leadership board and Avon Fire Authority provide overview and scrutiny of the service's budget performance to ensure the appropriate use of public money. The fire authority's meetings are broadcast on the service's social media channels to ensure transparency.

### **The current IT infrastructure is outdated– the service should continue to prioritise this area**

As referred to in the last section, there has been a lack of investment in the service's IT infrastructure. During our inspection, staff consistently told us that the capacity constraints of the IT infrastructure has limited their ability to work flexibly. During the initial stages of the pandemic, the service introduced time slots. This enabled staff to access the IT remotely at specific times of the day. However, staff told us that they sometimes had to work in the evenings or weekends to access the system. The poor IT infrastructure has affected the ability of staff to work effectively and productively.

Staff also told us that the 'tough pads' used for [home fire safety visits \(HFSVs\)](#) and risk information visits are outdated. We were told they often crash and don't always synchronise to the main system.

The service recognises that its IT infrastructure needs improving. In October 2020, the fire authority approved an initial £1.5m investment in its IT, alongside its ongoing investment. At the time of our inspection, a pilot was taking place whereby some staff are trialling Microsoft 365 and Microsoft Teams. Staff we spoke to at one station welcomed the recent upgrade, which gave them faster broadband. Senior leaders are now more focused on IT developments. We look forward to seeing how this area progresses.

### **Wholetime firefighters could be used more productively**

The service has an effective system in place to monitor performance. Managers have regular access to performance data, such as which core competencies are due to expire and key performance indicators that are relevant to their role. The service has a structure in place for reviewing and reporting on response performance at all levels of the organisation.

Despite this, the service could do more to make sure its workforce is productive. For example:

- it carries out fewer HFSVs than the English average;
- it has carried out fewer fire safety audits in the last three years compared with the English average;
- at the time of our inspection, [wholetime firefighters](#) were not carrying out any protection work; and
- a low number of site-specific risk information records had been completed.

## **The service collaborates with other emergency services**

We are pleased to see that the service meets its statutory duty to collaborate, and considers opportunities to collaborate with other emergency responders. The service works with the South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust and is supporting the Trust by driving ambulances. It has also provided a community first-responder vehicle at Thornbury Fire Station.

The service has joint command and control arrangements with the police and ambulance services for major incidents. It also has several [national inter-agency liaison officers](#) to enhance communications and respond to major incidents. Avon and Somerset Police told us that these arrangements were effective during the recent civil disturbances in Bristol. We were told that sharing its headquarters with the force further complements these arrangements.

Collaborative work is aligned to the priorities in the service plan. For example, the collaboration strategy details the service's current and future plans for collaboration. The service is currently reviewing and evaluating the benefits of its collaborations to make sure they are effective.

## **The service has business continuity arrangements in place**

We identified as an area for improvement the fact that the service should have a business continuity plan for its fire control room. We were encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since the last inspection. The service has good continuity arrangements in place for those areas where threats and risks are considered high. For example:

- Control staff are required to complete the appropriate training in business continuity each year. These threats and risks are regularly reviewed and tested so that staff are aware of the arrangements and their associated responsibilities.
- There is a secondary control room at Kingswood Fire Station. The systems and IT have been upgraded to mirror the existing control room.
- Four exercises are carried out each year to test the arrangements.

The service has business continuity plans in case of industrial action by operational staff, which focus on maintaining critical functions. It clearly outlines what actions the service will take following the announcement of industrial action.

## **There are sound financial management processes in place**

In the previous inspection, we identified as an area for improvement the fact that the medium-term financial plan was not linked to its service plan. We were encouraged to see the improvements the service has made. The medium-term financial plan is now clearly linked to the service plan.

The service carries out regular reviews to consider all its expenditure, including its non-pay costs. And challenge takes place which makes sure the service gets value for money. For example, a capital budget paper was presented to the fire authority members which allowed them to scrutinise the information presented.

Savings and efficiencies made have had no disproportionate impact on operational performance and the service to the public. The service is taking steps to make sure important areas, including estates, fleet and procurement, are in a position to improve their efficiency through sound financial management and best working practices. For example, the service currently shares some of its estates with its partner organisations.

In our previous inspection, the service received an 'area for improvement' in making sure the way it deploys supervisors to operational incidents is cost effective. The service has made progress in this area. We found that the service has two levels of watch manager. These are an A and B grade, with the watch manager B attracting a higher level of pay. Following our previous inspection, the service has completed a pilot scheme to have one level of watch manager. The service told us they will move to a structure of one watch manager per watch, via a phased approach, by 2024.

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



### Good (2018: Good)

Avon Fire and Rescue Service is good 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.

#### Area for improvement

The service should assure itself that it has the capability and capacity it needs to achieve future change.

#### Innovative practice

The service actively considers and exploits opportunities for generating extra income. For example, it is the only fire and rescue service in England to secure a public sector decarbonisation grant of £823,670.

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 effective financial plans**

The service has developed a sound understanding of its future financial challenges. It plans to mitigate its significant financial risks. For example, the service has acted on the pension court ruling in the ongoing firefighters pension dispute. It is also making plans for the government's comprehensive spending review, which may affect the service.

The service's 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 a potential reduction in business rates and council tax.

We are pleased to see that the service has identified savings and investment opportunities to improve the service to the public, and generate further savings. For example:

- the service has been successful in securing an £823,670 [Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme](#) grant;
- the service has refurbished Avonmouth Fire Station and has identified other fire stations that require modernisation; and
- the transformation programme will make improvements in the service's processes and policies.

## **The service has a clear plan for its reserves**

The service plan details planned spending, which funding is received from different sources, and the capital requirements for the forthcoming year. The service also has a sensible and sustainable plan for using its [reserves](#). For example, these will be used for:

- improving IT infrastructure;
- investing in [national operational guidance](#); and
- refurbishing or redeveloping fire stations.

## **The fleet and estates strategies are linked to the service plan**

The service's estates and fleet strategies have clear links to the service plan. For example, the service has introduced seven new fire engines. Staff were involved in the design phase and had an opportunity to provide feedback. Both the estates and fleet strategies exploit opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness. For example, the service is investing in its fire stations to make them more carbon neutral, by installing charging points for electric vehicles. It is also exploring renewable energy systems. The service has a good understanding of its fleet vehicles and has a plan for when each vehicle needs to be replaced.

### **The service has invested in a transformation programme, but it should ensure it has the capability and capacity to make future change**

The service has invested in a transformation programme which aims to improve its policies and processes through the use of digital technology. This is funded until April 2023. The chief fire officer is the senior responsible owner for the programme and there are relevant governance arrangements in place. One of the main aims of the programme is to implement the improvements in the service's IT infrastructure. At the time of our inspection, there were several work packages in development.

The transformation programme will also seek to improve the way processes and policies are reviewed, so that this is done in an efficient and timely manner. During our inspection, we found several policies that had passed their review date – the service recognises this and has prioritised these policies for review.

The service should ensure it has the capability and capacity to make future change. Some staff we spoke to felt they were working at full capacity. We look forward to seeing the developments and outcomes of the transformation programme.

### **The service takes advantage of opportunities to secure external funding and generate income**

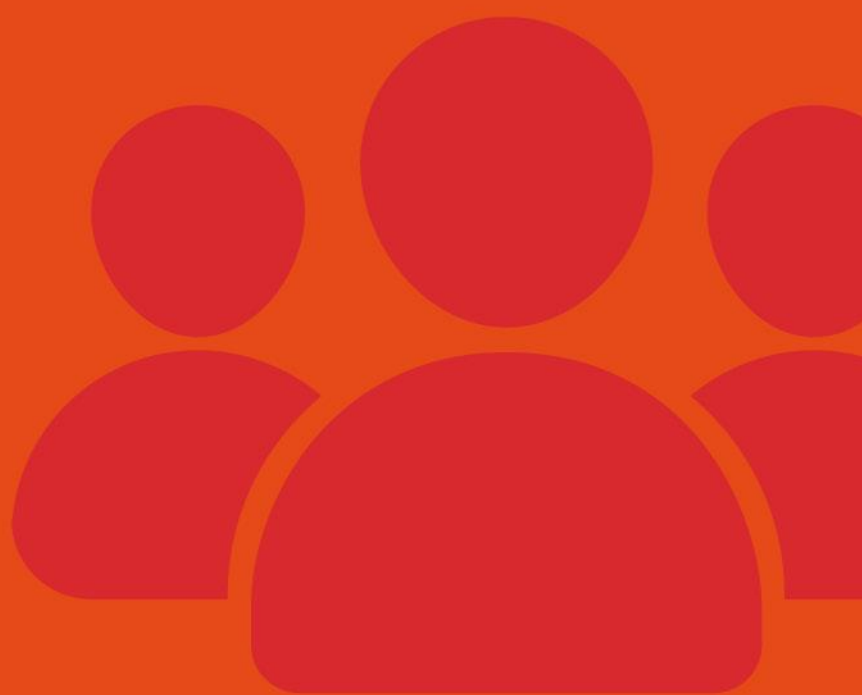
The service actively considers and exploits opportunities for generating additional income. For example, its public sector decarbonisation grant of £823,670, mentioned above.

Where appropriate, it has secured external funding to invest in improvements to the service it provides to the public. This includes:

- a COVID-19 grant; and
- an additional protection uplift grant and funds from the Building Risk Review programme.

The service encourages heads of department to seek opportunities for additional external funding.

# People



# How well does the service look after its people?



## Requires improvement

### Summary

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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, Avon Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at looking after its people.

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In our 2018 inspection, we highlighted as a cause of concern that the service hadn't clearly communicated with staff about its new values and how to demonstrate these in the workplace. We are pleased to see how much progress has been made since then. The service consulted with staff to develop a new values and behaviour framework, and its values are now well understood by staff. It has also published a leadership charter, setting out expectations of managers, and a substantial majority of staff told us they think that their line manager meets these standards.

There has also been good progress in how the service looks after the wellbeing and mental health of its staff, which we listed as a cause of concern in 2018. It now has wellbeing policies which are well understood and effective, and a good range of wellbeing provisions for staff. Despite this, some managers did tell us that they hadn't received training in providing wellbeing support to their teams, and so weren't always confident in doing so. The service has processes on issues like health and safety, and staff absence, although some of its policies are out of date and need to be reviewed.

In our previous inspection, we said that the service needed to improve the way it deals with succession planning. Its plan for this has not been finalised, and the service still needs to do more in this area. Staffing shortfalls have continued to be a problem. Firefighters are often moved to other stations, and the control room has gone below the minimum number of staff required. Some staff haven't received the training they need to do their jobs, and non-operational staff can't access the full range of training available to operational staff. Training in equality, diversity and inclusion has also been

inconsistent. We recognise that the pandemic has affected face-to-face training, but the service still needs to do more.

The service also needs to improve its processes for addressing bullying and harassment, and for making its recruitment and promotion processes fair and open. It has made some improvements in increasing diversity at all levels of the organisation – it has identified parts of the recruitment process which could be a potential barrier to female or BAME applicants and is addressing these appropriately. However, staff do not always understand the service's positive action initiatives.

Overall, the service has made good progress in some areas relating to how it deals with its workforce, but some areas still need improvement.

## Promoting the right values and culture



### Good (2018: Inadequate)

Avon Fire and Rescue Service is good 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.

#### Areas for improvement

- The service should assure itself that managers are appropriately trained and understand the wellbeing provisions available to them and wider staff.
- The service should assure itself that managers are appropriately trained to manage staff absence.

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 effectively communicated its values and behaviours to all staff

It is encouraging to see the extensive progress which the service has made in communicating its values and behaviours throughout the wider workforce. This was highlighted as part of a cause of concern in 2018. The service worked with staff to develop its new values and behaviour framework. It now has well-defined values which are understood by staff. Of staff who responded to our survey, 99 percent (275 out of 277) said they are aware of the service's statement of values.

In our previous inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should assure itself that senior and middle managers visibly act as role models. The service has since published its leadership charter, which sets out expectations of leaders at all levels. The senior leaders have engaged regularly with staff. Staff told us they appreciated the two-way communication that has taken place. They told us that

the behaviours of both their colleagues and line managers were reflective of the service's values. Of the respondents to the staff survey, 81 percent (224 out of 275) said that their line managers consistently model and maintain the service values. This figure was 87 percent (239 out of 275) for colleagues. And 80 percent (221 out of 277) said they were treated with dignity and respect at work.

### **The service has good wellbeing provisions in place**

In our last inspection, the service received a cause of concern related to looking after the wellbeing and mental health of its staff. We are pleased to report that significant progress has been made in this respect. The service has wellbeing policies in place for staff, which are well understood and effective. Of the respondents to our staff survey, 95 percent (264 out of 277) reported they can access services to support their mental wellbeing. The service has provided some staff with mental health first aid training which has been well received.

A good range of wellbeing provisions are available to support both physical and mental health. For example:

- specialist trauma practitioners, who are trained to help people who have experienced a traumatic (or potentially traumatic) event;
- blue light champions and family liaison officers; and
- access to Red Poppy, an external workplace counselling service – staff who had used this service spoke highly of it.

Following feedback from staff, the service has introduced dedicated outdoor wellbeing spaces. Firefighters were pivotal in creating these spaces and continue to maintain them. Staff told us they valued having this wellbeing area.

Despite the good wellbeing provisions in place, some managers told us they weren't always confident in providing wellbeing support to their teams as they haven't been provided with the appropriate training. This may result in some staff not receiving regular wellbeing conversations. Our staff survey showed that 47 percent of respondents (131 out of 277) only had two or fewer wellbeing conversations with their line manager each year.

### **There is a clear approach to health and safety**

The service takes a good approach to health and safety. There are clear policies for lone workers, managing secondary contracts, risk assessments, and fitness testing. The service provides health and safety training to all its staff as part of their induction. We sampled training records, which showed most firefighters received training in manual handling (lifting, carrying or moving anything using your hands or body). The service monitors health and safety trends in various ways, including through local performance monitoring and at senior leadership meetings.

Our staff survey shows that 87 percent of staff (242 out of 277) feel their personal safety and welfare is treated seriously at work, while 98 percent (271 out of 277) said the service has clear procedures to report all accidents, [near misses](#), and dangerous occurrences. Staff and their representative bodies have confidence in the health and safety approach taken by the service.

We did find that the number of health and safety incidents has increased in the last year and not all staff receive refresher training in health and safety. The service could benefit from reviewing its health and safety policy, as we found this had passed its review date.

### **The service has effective absence management processes in place**

As part of our inspection, we reviewed some case files where staff were absent for more than 28 days. We considered how the service manages and supports staff through absence, including sickness, parental and special leave. We found these cases were managed well – centrally and in accordance with policy.

The service’s policy states that a return-to-work interview will only take place for staff who are absent for four days or more. We recognise that a trial is being carried out where a welfare check will take place for staff who are absent for less than four days. But the service needs to assure itself that managers are discussing absences with staff regardless of how long they are absent from work, in line with its own policy.

We did find that most managers we spoke to hadn’t been provided with the appropriate training in how to manage staff absence. With the lack of training, the service may not be tailoring the extra support that could be provided to the individual.

The service records the reason for all absences, which enables it to monitor any trends. Overall, the service saw a decrease in overall staff absences for [wholetime firefighters](#), [fire control](#) and non-operational staff over the 12 months between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021.

### **Getting the right people with the right skills**



#### **Requires improvement (2018: Good)**

Avon 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.

#### **Areas for improvement**

- The service should put in place a credible succession plan, for the whole organisation.
- The service should assure itself that all staff are appropriately trained for 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 should improve its approach to succession planning**

In our previous inspection, we identified as an area for improvement the fact that the service should put in place a credible succession plan for the whole organisation. There hasn't been enough progress in this area as the succession plan is still in draft.

We recognise the pandemic has affected the service's ability to recruit for additional posts. However, firefighters told us that they are regularly deployed to other fire stations across the service at the start of their shift, as there aren't enough staff to crew the fire engines. This was a frustration, as the firefighters felt that they were missing out on training and development opportunities with their team. We also found that fire control went below the minimum staffing levels on many occasions. The service would benefit from having a succession plan for the whole organisation.

The service does some workforce planning, such as forecasting future retirements, but needs to do more. For example, the departmental heads are responsible for planning their own respective areas. But the human resources team still isn't always included in the succession planning process, as was identified in the last inspection.

The service would benefit from ensuring a clearer link between its service plan and the organisation's strategic overview of succession planning. We found limited evidence that the service's planning allows it to fully consider workforce skills and overcome any gaps in capability. For example, each departmental manager plans the training needs for the current financial year, but most don't plan beyond this period.

## **The service needs to improve the way it understands the training needs of its workforce**

The service should make sure that all staff are appropriately trained for their role. We were disappointed to find that some staff told us they haven't received the appropriate training for their roles for several years. For example, it has been more than three years since some operational staff received training in carrying out [home fire safety visits \(HFSVs\)](#), or how to gather risk information. Most managers that we spoke to hadn't received the appropriate training in how to resolve workforce concerns or how to conduct a performance development review. The service rightly recognises this, and some middle managers are now receiving management training. But the appropriate training should be provided to all managers across the service.

The service carries out most of its risk-critical training for operational staff well. We found good systems in place to make sure managers take responsibility for maintaining their team's critical competencies. Monthly performance data is provided which allows them to scrutinise and monitor training records. The service has introduced a training planner. The operational staff we spoke to were positive about this as it allows them to see what training is planned at least three months in advance.

However, we found that incident commanders would benefit from having a continuous professional development plan as they don't receive regular training in between the two-yearly assessments. We also found that fire control staff should be provided with refresher fire survival guidance training, as this is only provided when they first start their jobs. The service has identified this as part of its Grenfell action plan.



## **There are inconsistencies in the way staff undertake learning and development**

We found that non-operational staff feel there is a lack of equality between operational and non-operational staff in what learning and development they can access. For example, they told us they can only undertake specialist courses that are specific to their roles. Operational staff can participate in a wide range of learning and development, but this is not always available to non-operational staff. In the staff survey, 28 percent (77 out of 277) of staff told us they were not satisfied with the learning and development available to them.

There is a structure in place for operational staff to follow to further develop themselves. For example, supervisory managers must complete an Institution of Occupational Safety and Health qualification. They must also complete the relevant technical papers to be considered for promotion.

During the inspection, we also found that the learning created from operational debriefs isn't always available to staff, so they aren't able to continually learn from incidents or training exercises that have taken place.

The service adapted how it provides learning and development during the pandemic, including the use of virtual platforms. However, some staff felt that the level of learning and development available to them had decreased during this time.

## **Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity**



### **Requires improvement (2018: Inadequate)**

Avon 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.

### **Areas for improvement**

- The service should make sure that it has effective grievance procedures. It should identify and implement ways to improve staff confidence in the grievance process.
- The service should make sure that its bullying, harassment and discrimination policy is up to date and is understood by all staff.
- The service should make sure it has robust processes in place to undertake equality impact assessments and review any actions agreed as a result.
- The service should make sure that all staff understand the benefits of equality, diversity and inclusion, and their role in promoting it.

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 made progress in equality, diversity, and inclusion, but more needs to be done**

In our previous inspection, we identified as a cause of concern that the service should act immediately to change staff behaviours. We also highlighted the need for all staff to understand equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) principles. The service recognises that it needs to make sure all staff receive meaningful EDI training, as we found this is inconsistent across the service. The service provided face-to-face EDI training to most senior and middle managers, but we found that most staff we spoke to hadn't received this training. We recognise the pandemic has affected face-to-face training. The service has refreshed its e-learning package, but staff who received this training told us it was ineffective.

The service has introduced a variety of EDI initiatives, such as wrapping fire engines with key messages. Some initiatives haven't always received initial support from staff. And without a clear strategy or evaluation mechanism in place, it was difficult to understand how effective they had been. The service should continually engage with staff and network groups.

Following our last inspection, the service introduced processes for involving staff and seeking feedback. One of these is the staff engagement network, which provides the opportunity for staff to give any feedback or suggest improvements on any matters in relation to their work. It is run and chaired by staff, and a senior leader attends who can provide extra support to the network when required. We spoke to some staff who were members of the network. They were enthusiastic about it and the way it is helping the service make positive change.

The service has a process in place to carry out equality impact assessments. However, these were not always completed. Therefore, the impact on each of the protected characteristics wasn't being properly assessed or dealt with. More could be done to engage with both internal and external networks to inform this. The service recognises this is an area it could improve, and the equality impact assessment process is currently being reviewed.

## **The service must do more to instil confidence in the bullying, harassment and discrimination process**

In our previous inspection, we identified as an area for improvement the fact that the service should have an effective grievance process in place. We found some progress in this area, but more work is required. We were disappointed to find that the grievance policy was last published in January 2007, and there hasn't been any meaningful review since then.

The service could go further to improve staff understanding of bullying, harassment and discrimination, including its responsibilities for eliminating it. We found that the bullying and harassment policy had also passed its review date and was last updated in September 2015.

In our staff survey, 18 percent (49 out of 277) of respondents told us they had been subject to bullying or harassment. Of those, 78 percent (38 out of 49) said the bullying or harassment was by someone senior to them. We were surprised to find that approximately half of these respondents hadn't reported it, mostly because they thought nothing would happen. Twenty-five percent of respondents (68 out of 277) told us they had been subject to discrimination over the past 12 months; of these, only 19 percent (5 out of 27) felt their concerns had been properly dealt with.

In the absence of any clear policies, staff will not have the confidence to report any bullying, harassment or discrimination concerns. We recognise that updated policies are in the consultation stage before being published, but more could be done to prioritise this.

## **The service is continuing to improve its workforce diversity**

The service has made some improvements in increasing diversity at all levels of the organisation. For firefighter recruitment specifically, 16 percent of all new recruits since 2018 have been women and 16 percent from a BAME background. This is an improvement from previous years. Of the service's entire workforce, 17 percent are women and 2 percent are BAME.

Positive action initiatives are carried out to promote roles across the service. However, these are not always understood by the workforce. Staff would benefit from understanding what positive action is as part of their EDI training.

The service is continuing to learn from its firefighter recruitment campaigns and evaluates each stage. It has identified that some female and BAME applicants didn't hold a driving licence, which was a requirement of the recruitment process. This requirement has now been removed from future recruitment campaigns to encourage more female and BAME applicants to apply to become firefighters.

We were pleased to see the service has reviewed its fire stations to make sure they have appropriate facilities for all staff. As a result, the service created new changing facilities at Weston-Super-Mare Fire Station. Some stations have been prioritised for refurbishment or redevelopment. In our staff survey, 95 percent (261 out of 275) of respondents told us they have access to gender-appropriate workplace facilities.

## Managing performance and developing leaders



### **Requires improvement (2018: Requires improvement)**

Avon 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 improve all staff understanding and application of the performance development review process.
- The service should make sure its selection, development and promotion of staff is open and fair.

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

#### **The service should make sure its performance development reviews are meaningful**

The service is carrying out a review of its performance development review (PDR) process to make it more relevant to staff. But the service has not made enough progress in this area, which we identified as an area for improvement during our 2018 inspection. Most staff we spoke to had received an annual PDR, but not all staff found it meaningful. In the staff survey, 40 percent (103 out of 257) of respondents said they don't find the PDR useful. We found that managers hadn't received the appropriate training in how to conduct the PDR. This may prevent it from being effective.

#### **The service should make sure that staff have confidence in the promotions process**

In our previous inspection, we raised as an area for improvement the fact that the service should make sure its promotions process is consistent and fair. It has made some progress in this area. For example, HR is represented on interview panels, and a transfer, appointments and promotions panel for operational staff has been introduced. The service has also introduced a new promotions policy, but it is heavily focused on operational roles.

From the files we sampled, we didn't find the promotions process consistent for all roles across the service. For example, we found the HR function wasn't always

involved in all aspects of the shortlisting and selection process of senior leadership roles.

We also found that there is no pass mark for interviews of operational staff. The service recognises this and will be introducing one.

Most staff we spoke to didn't have confidence in the promotions process. Some felt that middle managers weren't consistent when applying the promotions policy. The staff survey showed that 56 percent (156 of 277) of respondents disagreed that the promotions process is fair.

### **The service has invested in developing leaders**

In our previous inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should improve its talent management process and identify talented individuals who could be future leaders. The service has now invested in a range of leadership programmes. These include training by the Institute of Leadership & Management:

- level 3: for aspiring leaders;
- level 5: for middle managers; and
- level 6 and 7: bachelor's and master's degree level.

The service doesn't have a specific talent management process. But during our inspection, the service published its 'development pathway', which provides a career structure for all roles, including non-operational staff. We look forward to seeing how this develops in the future.

The service knows it needs to go further to increase workforce diversity in middle and senior management roles. Plans are in place to address this. The service has subscribed to the Springboard and Stepping Up programmes. These aim to unlock potential and develop talent, and are aimed at women, BAME staff, and staff with disabilities.

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