HMICFRS

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services

Fire & Rescue Service 2023–25

Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service

Contents

Changes to this round of inspection **1**

Overall summary **2**

Service in numbers **4**

Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies **6**

Areas for improvement 6

Main findings 6

Preventing fires and other risks **9**

Areas for improvement 9

Main findings 10

Protecting the public through fire regulation **15**

Main findings 15

Responding to fires and other emergencies **20**

Areas for improvement 20

Main findings 20

Responding to major and multi-agency incidents **26**

Innovative practice 26

Main findings 27

Making best use of resources **30**

Area for improvement 30

Promising practice 30

Main findings 31

Making the fire and rescue service affordable now and in the future **34**

Area for improvement 34

Innovative practice 35

Main findings 35

Promoting the right values and culture 38

Areas for improvement 38

Main findings 38

Getting the right people with the right skills 42

Areas for improvement 42

Main findings 42

Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity 45

Cause of concern 45

Main findings 46

Managing performance and developing leaders 51

Areas for improvement 51

Main findings 51

Changes to this round of inspection

We last inspected Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service in January 2022. And in July 2022, we published our inspection report with our findings on the service's effectiveness and efficiency and how well it looks after its people.

This inspection contains our third assessment of the service's effectiveness and efficiency, and how well it looks after its people. We have measured the service against the same 11 areas and given a grade for each.

We haven't given separate grades for effectiveness, efficiency and people as we did previously. This is to encourage the service to consider our inspection findings as a whole and not focus on just one area.

We now assess services against the characteristics of good performance, and we more clearly link our judgments to causes of concern and areas for improvement. We have also expanded our previous four-tier system of graded judgments to five. As a result, we can state more precisely where we consider improvement is needed and highlight good performance more effectively. However, these changes mean it isn't possible to make direct comparisons between grades awarded in this round of fire and rescue service inspections with those from previous years.

A reduction in grade, particularly from good to adequate, doesn't necessarily mean there has been a reduction in performance, unless we say so in the report.

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

More information on how we assess fire and rescue services and our graded judgments is available on our website.

Overall summary

Our judgments

Our inspection assessed how well Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service has performed in 11 areas. We have made the following graded judgments:

Outstanding	Good	Adequate	Requires improvement	Inadequate
	Public safety through fire regulation	Understanding fire and risk	Preventing fire and risk	
	Responding to major incidents	Responding to fires and emergencies	Promoting values and culture	
	Future affordability	Best use of resources	Promoting fairness and diversity	
		Right people, right skills		
		Managing performance and developing leaders		

In the rest of the report, we set out our detailed findings about the areas in which the service has performed well and where it should improve.

HMI summary

It was a pleasure to revisit Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service, and I am grateful for the positive and constructive way in which the service worked with our inspection staff.

I am pleased with some aspects of the performance of Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service in keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks, but it needs to improve in some areas to provide a consistently good service. At the time of the inspection, I recognise that the service had experienced several changes in chief fire officers' posts and other senior leadership roles. I don't underestimate the significance of the constant change in leadership roles and its effect on the performance, culture and efficiency of a fire and rescue service.

We identified that the service had paused key projects while it awaited the police, fire and crime commissioner (PFCC) elections and confirmation of the chief fire officer.

But it was disappointing to find that the service was reluctant to progress plans and implement future projects that would potentially make it significant savings and efficiencies.

The service has developed a specialist team to work across fire and police. This is to manage cultural engagement activities, to align equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and positive action to organisational aims, and to encourage change initiatives. It was therefore disappointing to see that the service hadn't made the progress we expected since our 2021 inspection in addressing the cause of concern in relation to improving EDI. I continue to have concerns over how the service ensures fairness and promotes diversity.

In view of these findings, I will be in regular contact with the chief fire officer as I don't underestimate how much improvement is needed.

My principal findings from our assessments of the service over the past year are as follows:

- Although it has made some progress, the service still needs to improve its EDI, including how it understands data and its use in equality impact assessments, and how it implements a programme of positive action.
- The service isn't prioritising its home fire safety visits (HFSVs) effectively, which means those who are most at risk aren't always being seen the quickest.
- We found evidence of behaviours that weren't in line with service values in middle and senior managers, and some members of the senior leadership team told us that they don't feel valued.
- The service doesn't always share information regarding change or projects to the whole workforce, and staff told us there is a disconnect between different levels of the service.
- The service continues to invest in collaboration with Northamptonshire Police and the Office of the PFCC, and we found examples of promising practice in various teams.

Overall, there is a clear commitment from staff and senior leaders to improve. It has established some good processes and has sound financial planning. But it is important the service now progresses these improvements further.

Given the nature of some of the problems we have identified, we will keep in close contact with the service to monitor its progress. We will also revisit within six months to review the progress it has made against its action plan.

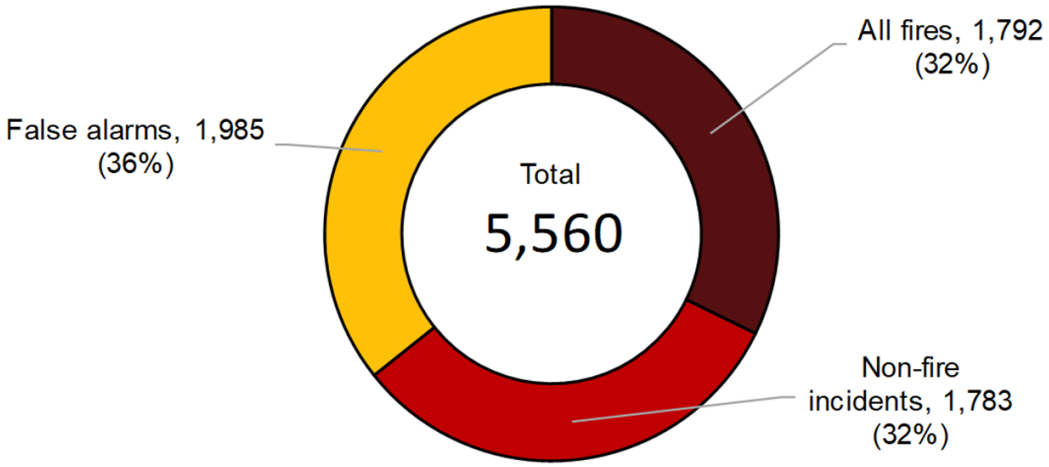
Roy Wilsher

HM Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Service in numbers

Profile	Northamptonshire	England
Area Square miles	914	50,370
Population (thousands) 30 June 2022	792	57,106
Population density Thousands per square mile	0.9	1.1
Cost		
Funding Year ending 31 March 2023	£25.9m	£2.5bn
Expenditure per population Year ending 31 March 2023	£34.34	£46.66
Response		
Incidents attended per 1,000 population Year ending 30 September 2023	7.0	10.4
Home fire safety checks carried out by fire and rescue service per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2023	7.2	9.3
Fire safety audits per 100 known premises Year ending 31 March 2023	4.4	2.0
Availability of wholetime pumps Year ending 31 March 2023	100.0%	
Availability of on-call pumps Year ending 31 March 2023	55.8%	

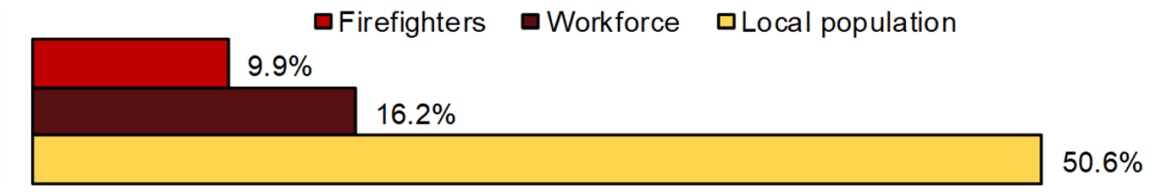
Incidents attended in year ending 30 September 2023



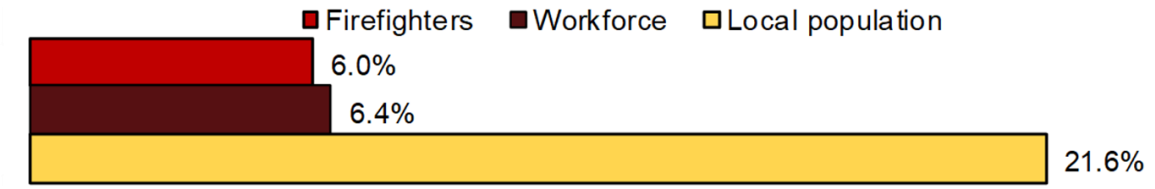
Workforce

	Northamptonshire	England
Five-year change in total workforce 2018 to 2023	-1.4%	1.4%
Number of firefighters per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2023	0.55	0.61
Percentage of firefighters who are wholetime Year ending 31 March 2023	56.6%	65.5%

Percentage of firefighters, workforce and population who identified as a woman as at 31 March 2023



Percentage of firefighters, workforce and population who were from ethnic minority backgrounds as at 31 March 2023



References to ethnic minorities in this report include people from White minority backgrounds but exclude people from Irish minority backgrounds. This is due to current data collection practices for national data. For more information on data and analysis in this report, please view the 'About the data' section of our website.

Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies

Adequate

Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service is adequate at understanding risk.

Each fire and rescue service should identify and assess all foreseeable fire and rescue-related risks that could affect its communities. It should use its protection and response capabilities to prevent or mitigate these risks for the public.

Areas for improvement

Senior leaders should take accountability for community risk management plan priorities. They should lead and influence cross-organisational activity, so staff understand how they contribute to the objectives.

The service should make sure that consultation with the public is meaningful in influencing its future plans and informing its risk profile.

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

Main findings

The service uses a wide range of sources to identify risk

Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service has assessed a suitable range of risks and threats using a thorough community risk management planning process. In its assessment of risk, it uses information it has collected from a broad range of internal and external sources and datasets. It has a risk analysis document, and we were encouraged to see that it had completed an emergency cover review which considered current and future risks.

When the service assesses risks, it records its findings in an easily understood community risk management plan (CRMP). We found that these were reflected and recorded in its corporate risk registers and in the actions in the CRMP service improvement plan.

The service should consult more with the local community to help inform its CRMP

In our last inspection, we identified an area for improvement – that the service should make sure consultation with the local community is meaningful in influencing its future plans and informing its risk profile.

The service's current CRMP is from 2022 to 2025. It is in its last year. We found that when it reviewed its CRMP in 2023, the service missed opportunities to gather opinions from the public. We note that the Office of the PFCC recently consulted with the public over the council tax precept, which included Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service. But this isn't enough progress since the last inspection, so the area for improvement remains.

Senior leaders need to take more responsibility for CRMP priorities

At the time of this inspection, the service had seen significant strategic leadership changes. This was affecting the momentum of its plans to implement change.

We found that the service isn't using the CRMP to influence its day-to-day activities, and senior leaders don't take responsibility for, or know about, the CRMP priorities. Senior leaders told us that they were apprehensive about approving any projects due to awaiting the new chief fire officer and PFCC. As a result, some of the core tasks of the CRMP have yet to be completed, such as the prevention data systems.

The service supports the CRMP with a service improvement plan. This describes how the service intends to use its prevention, protection and response activities to mitigate or reduce the risks and threats the community faces, both now and in the future. We found that despite the uncertainty around leadership changes, staff continued to be professional and contribute to tasks in the plan.

The service gathers, maintains and shares a good range of risk information despite data systems hindering performance

The service routinely collects and updates the information it has about the highest-risk people, places and threats it has identified. It continues to improve how it records and gathers risk information and shares this in weekly 'pacesetter' meetings. These meetings include response, protection and prevention functions.

We sampled a broad range of the risk information the service collects, including high-rise residential buildings, hospitals and short-term risks.

Risk information, once processed, is available to the service's prevention, protection and response staff. But we found that the data systems were burdensome and not integrated. Staff told us the systems were awaiting upgrades or updates. While the service told us that it has a formal way to share risk information, we found that this wasn't consistent. Most staff were unaware of the process for sharing risk information between departments. The service is reliant on email, paper-based forms and oral communication to mitigate risk. The service should make sure it has the right tools and systems to be more effective.

Where appropriate, the service shares risk information with other organisations. For example, for premises close to its geographical borders, it shares risk information with neighbouring fire and rescue services.

Staff at the locations we visited, including firefighters and emergency control room staff, were able to show us that they could quickly access, use and share risk information, to help them resolve incidents safely.

The service uses the outcomes of operational activity effectively to build an understanding of risk

The service records and communicates risk information effectively. It also routinely updates risk assessments and uses feedback from local and national operational activities to inform its planning assumptions. For example, following incident debriefs, the service communicates any learning to all staff, via a publication called the 'weekly bulletin'.

In one edition, the service raised awareness of the risks associated with driving through flood water and reinforced safe working practices while working in and near water. However, at the time of our inspection, the service was introducing a new operational learning system due to previous difficulties in storing information.

Preventing fires and other risks

Requires improvement

Northamptonshire 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 sectors, and with the police and ambulance services. They should share intelligence and risk information with these other organisations when they identify vulnerability or exploitation.

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure it trains its staff, so that they understand how to target risk effectively and can competently carry out home fire safety visits.

The service should make sure it allocates enough resources to meet its prevention strategy to support cross-functional collaborative working and shared intelligence.

The service should make sure it quality assures its prevention activity, so staff carry out home fire safety visits to an appropriate standard.

The service should make sure its supporting systems provide an accurate picture of community risk, so that staff can prioritise the most vulnerable.

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

Main findings

HFSVs have increased, but the prevention team could be more effective by working more closely with protection and response

The service's prevention strategy is clearly linked to the risks it has identified in its CRMP.

In 2021/22, the service completed 2,902 HFSVs. In 2022/23, the service increased its output to 5,716 HFSVs. Of these, the proportion of HFSVs that were targeted at vulnerable or at-risk groups by Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service in 2022/23 was 72 percent (4,100 out of 5,716).

The service's teams work well with other relevant organisations on fire prevention, and they share relevant information when needed. The service uses information to adjust its planning assumptions. We found evidence of community impact assessments that identified learning with actions.

We found that the prevention team could work more effectively to help direct activity between the service's prevention, protection and response functions. For example, we found limited evidence of a formal means to share risk intelligence between the protection and prevention functions.

Prevention work could be resourced more efficiently to achieve more effective outcomes

The service has made some improvements to increase staffing in prevention, with the recruitment of two additional prevention officers. The service told us that firefighters are trained to carry out HFSVs at high-risk visits. But we found a reluctance to use and train firefighters to support very high-risk cases. As a result, the home safety prevention team has limited capacity to meet the volume of referrals. The service isn't making the most of its existing resources.

The service uses a risk matrix tool for referrals, which sets out how quickly it should make first contact with the member of the public. We found evidence of the service not having contacted some very high and high-risk cases within expected timescales. And the prevention policy and guidance don't have any set timescales or standard for when to visit or resolve HFSVs. As a result, some HFSVs could be on file for an undefined time without contact or a visit.

The service should make sure it allocates enough resources to meet its prevention strategy, which supports cross-functional collaborative working and shared intelligence.

Delays in data systems are hindering prevention teams' ability to effectively manage, monitor and triage HFSVs

The CRMP includes a project to update the prevention database. This project has had significant delays. To mitigate this risk, the service is using multiple data systems to maintain HFSV information, which isn't efficient. The HFSV process is paper-based, which has led to delays in entering occupiers' information on to the databases.

As a result, the service is ineffective at providing live, accurate prevention data, with limited records on how the prevention team triages cases. We were reassured to find that the service is aware of this risk, which is recorded on its corporate risk register.

The service is limited in its capacity to use data to accurately direct prevention activity towards the people most at risk from fire and other emergencies in a reasonable time frame. It should make sure that the prevention database and supporting systems are able to support prevention activity with the targeting of risk, and that it can provide an accurate operating picture of the community risk to help staff prioritise the most vulnerable.

The service provides a range of advice and interventions to the public

The service uses a risk-based approach to clearly prioritise its prevention activity towards people most at risk from fire and other emergencies. It uses specialist prevention teams to plan HFSV work. Operational teams also completed prevention work as part of local station plans. But we found that the service could use operational crews more effectively to target risk.

The service uses a broad range of information and data to target its prevention activity at vulnerable individuals and groups. The prevention team provides guidance and advice via the service's website, educational toolkits and social media campaigns. However, staff told us that prevention safety advice could be linked more to incidents, to inform the public of the associated risks during and after these incidents.

The service carries out a range of interventions, which it adapts to the level of risk in its communities. This includes general fire safety and advice on:

- candles, cooking and escape planning;
- smoking;
- medicines and medical devices;
- home fire detection and assistive technology;
- fire and heaters (safer heating);
- electrical safety;
- deliberate fires; and
- cluttering and hoarding.

Station-based staff should have a better understanding of the prevention strategy

In the last inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should make sure the new ways of working to provide HFSVs are fully understood by staff, to best support the targeting of risk.

We found prevention staff to be knowledgeable, experienced and professional. They told us they have the right skills to make HFSVs and were confident in giving advice to the public, partner organisations and operational crews.

HFSVs and fire safety campaigns cover an appropriate range of hazards to help reduce risk for the public. But operational staff told us they have limited training or confidence to complete these activities. Not appropriately training staff in these prevention activities can place vulnerable people at greater risk from fire and other emergencies.

We found that station-based staff had inconsistent knowledge and understanding of the service's prevention strategy. Staff gave a range of different answers when asked about their station plan or station targets for prevention activity. This continues to be an area for improvement.

The service is good at referring and responding to safeguarding concerns

Staff we interviewed told us about occasions when they had identified safeguarding concerns following incidents. They told us they feel confident to act appropriately and promptly to initiate safeguarding referrals.

The service consistently acts appropriately on the referrals it receives, giving enhanced support through its complex case officer. We saw how the complex case officer co-ordinates work with partners to reach the most vulnerable in society; for example:

- attending multi-disciplinary team meetings;
- referring to and working closely with Northamptonshire Safeguarding Adults Board;
- providing awareness training to community mental health teams for hoarding and self-neglect; and
- working with the police safeguarding team to assess properties to understand the risk to frontline staff, and communicating this to the duty national inter-agency liaison officer and control, to make sure this information is available and identified with markers on the mobilising system.

We found that prevention staff really cared about the people they support and followed up on actions. They told us that they try to do everything they can to achieve a positive outcome. As a result, we found that the service didn't always have a clear exit strategy when dealing with these cases, and resources could sometimes be tied up longer than required.

The service works well with partner organisations

The service works with a wide range of organisations to prevent fires and other emergencies. This includes working with North and West Northamptonshire community safety partnerships to review, plan and action community safety issues.

We found good evidence that the service routinely referred people at greatest risk to organisations that may better meet their needs. Arrangements are also in place to receive referrals from others. And the service acts appropriately on the referrals it receives, such as from East Midlands Ambulance Service.

The service routinely exchanges information with other public sector organisations about people and groups at greatest risk. It uses this information to challenge planning assumptions and target prevention activity. Complex case officers share information with Northamptonshire Safeguarding Children Partnership and Northamptonshire Children's Trust to keep children safe from harm.

Northamptonshire Safer Roads Alliance provides a range of effective interventions to keep the public safe

The service is part of Northamptonshire Safer Roads Alliance. Staff told us they had been involved in road safety campaigns in their communities. The road safety plan focuses on the fatal four offences – speeding, drink/drug driving, not wearing a seat belt, and driving while distracted – which nationally are the main contributing factors in the majority of road traffic collisions (RTCs).

The service contributes to road safety education packages such as 'parking buddies'. In this initiative, pupils join their local fire crews and neighbourhood policing team on special patrols to help discourage inconsiderate parking near their primary schools.

The arson task force continues to proactively tackle 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. It is integrated into the Northamptonshire arson task force, a joint body that employs staff from both the service and Northamptonshire Police. They carry out a range of interventions, including bespoke arson risk visits, and support other specialist community teams who co-ordinate the Emergency Services Cadets scheme.

The arson task force also works with the agencies involved in multi-agency public protection arrangements to manage high-risk arson offenders within the county to reduce re-offending. In addition, other work that the task force does focuses on reducing antisocial behaviour and arson-related violence, and reacting appropriately to domestic violence and hate-related crime and incidents.

The service consistently evaluates its partnerships

The service has good evaluation tools in place to measure how effective its activity is and to make sure all sections of its communities get appropriate access to prevention services that meet their needs. We found evidence of the service evaluating its prevention initiatives to make sure they achieve the desired outcomes; for example, its firesetter referrer evaluation form and young person firesetter evaluation form.

Prevention activities take account of feedback from the public, other organisations and other parts of the service. For example, the service recently collected feedback from the public using an HFSV customer survey, where it sampled 120 customers out of 5,000 HFSVs. The customer survey gave positive results, with 92 percent of respondents stating that “they now know what to do in the event of a fire”.

The service uses feedback to inform its planning assumptions and change future activity to focus on what the community needs and what works.

The service should assure itself that HFSVs are carried out to the right standard

The service has a quality assurance framework. The prevention team is responsible for monitoring the overall quality and outcome of HFSVs. However, it is unclear how the service plans to carry out prevention activity to an appropriate standard. As a result, the service is missing opportunities to improve the standard of HFSVs and be more effective in targeting activity between prevention and response.

We found that not all operational staff knew how to, or chose to apply, the targeting methodology. Some HFSVs are therefore classified at the incorrect risk level. This creates additional work for the home safety prevention teams, who could be using their time to focus on very high-risk or complex cases.

The service should make sure it quality assures its prevention activity, so staff carry out HFSVs to the correct risk rating and appropriate standard.

Protecting the public through fire regulation

Good

Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service is good 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.

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

Main findings

The service's protection strategy is linked to its CRMP

In the last inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should make sure its risk-based inspection programme uses a systemised methodology that can be applied consistently in the future.

We found that the service's protection strategy is clearly linked to the risks it has identified in its CRMP.

The service predominantly uses the protection team to carry out fire safety activity, effectively exchanging information with other organisations as needed. For example, the protection team works closely with a joint East Midlands regional legal function to review premises that don't comply with fire safety legislation. The service then uses information to adjust planning assumptions and direct the protection team's activity.

In the last inspection, we noted that the service had piloted using operational crews to inspect houses in multiple occupation. Since then, this pilot hasn't progressed. We note that the service has reviewed the use of operational crews as part of its delivery plans. It told us that it intends to use firefighters to carry out inspections of licensed premises, though we saw no evidence of this work having begun.

We note that the service's plans include using grant money to train firefighters to support fire safety activities. But at the time of our inspection, firefighters weren't carrying out any fire safety work, and protection work generally was carried out in isolation rather than across the whole service.

We found some evidence of the service's protection, prevention and response functions exchanging information. However, they weren't exchanging information consistently or routinely.

The service's protection audits are focused on high-risk premises

At the time of our inspection, the risk-based inspection programme included approximately 25,000 premises that require audits. The programme is focused on the service's highest-risk buildings. It has identified 1,721 premises which are high risk for protection-related work.

The CRMP includes a review schedule of the current programme, which will contain an update of the current protection database. The service told us that this update will take account of new and emerging risks and make sure premises in the database have the correct risk-rating weight and re-inspection frequency. This work was pushed back due to project delays. We look forward to seeing it progress, including the introduction of a revised risk-based inspection programme.

The service completes audits to a satisfactory standard

We reviewed a range of audits that the service had carried out at different buildings across its area. The audits we reviewed had been completed to the timescales the service had set itself.

These included audits carried out:

- as part of the service's interim risk-based inspection programme;
- after fires at premises where fire safety legislation applies;
- after enforcement action had been taken; and
- at high-rise, high-risk buildings.

The audits we reviewed were completed to a high standard in a consistent, systematic way and in line with the service's policies. The service makes relevant information from its audits available to operational teams and control room operators. High-rise premises are easily identified on the mobilising system. This includes the type of evacuation principle (stay put, full evacuation and/or sequential evacuation).

The service's quality assurance is aligned to the National Fire Chiefs Council competency framework

The service carries out proportionate quality assurance of its protection activity. Protection staff have a quality assurance and development framework which complies with the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) Competency Framework for Fire Safety Regulators. The service records this on a template called the 'internal quality assurance checklist'. Line managers in protection teams review premises audits on a quarterly basis, with strong links to protection officers' development plans.

The service has good evaluation tools in place to measure how effective its activity is and to make sure all sections of its communities get appropriate access to protection services that meet their needs. We note that the service extended the scope of its emergency cover review to include an assessment and evaluation of protection activity. It concluded that the protection strategy was effective at supporting the high-level objectives contained within its CRMP.

The service has improved its use of enforcement

The service consistently uses its full range of enforcement powers, and when appropriate, it prosecutes those who don't comply with fire safety regulations. It has the correct resources in place to investigate and, when necessary, to prosecute individuals. In 2023/24, it was progressing three prosecution cases.

In the year ending 31 March 2023, the service issued 0 alteration notices, 108 informal notifications, 29 enforcements notices and 21 prohibition notices, and carried out 0 prosecutions. It completed 0 prosecutions in the 5 years from 2017/18 to 2022/23.

The service has sufficient resources to carry out fire protection work

The service has enough qualified protection staff to meet the requirements of its risk-based inspection programme. Staff get the right training, and work towards the appropriate accreditation. Regular continuing professional development is carried out, against the NFCC competency framework.

At the time of our inspection, eight fire safety inspectors had achieved their Level 4 diploma in fire safety. Four inspectors had achieved their Level 5 diploma in fire safety, and the remaining inspectors had enrolled to work towards this qualification.

The increase in permanent protection staff gives the service the capacity to support any legislation changes as part of its normal activity. This means that it can carry out complex enforcement activity and building regulation consultations, and provide a competent protection officer within the county 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This helps it provide the range of audit and enforcement activity needed, both now and in the future.

The service expects these arrangements to have a manageable effect on its other protection activity. It told us that 75 percent of a protection officer's time is dedicated to audits, while the remaining 25 percent is used for continuing professional development. This will assist the service in adapting to and managing the effect of new legislation. For example, the service has allocated £4,500 of fire protection grant money for specific fire safety training in relation to fire doors.

The service is adapting consistently to new legislation

Since our last inspection, the Building Safety Act 2022 and the Fire Safety (England) Regulations 2022 have been introduced to bring about better regulation and management of tall buildings. The service is supporting the introduction of the Building Safety Regulator.

The Fire Safety (England) Regulations 2022 introduced a range of duties for the managers of tall buildings. These include a requirement to give the fire and rescue service floor plans and inform them of any substantial faults to essential firefighting equipment, such as firefighting lifts.

At the development stage of designing new residential and commercial schemes, the service provides a document for developers and local planning authorities on issues relating to fire safety. This means that at the earliest opportunity, the planning and design of developments considers fire and rescue service needs in the event of a fire, making the public safer.

The service has good arrangements in place to receive this information. When it doesn't receive the right information, it takes action and updates the risk information it gives its operational staff and fire control.

The service works effectively with partners to inspect and enforce safety standards

The service works closely with other enforcement agencies to regulate fire safety and routinely exchanges risk information with them. For the Silverstone Formula 1 race, protection officers used their enforcement powers alongside licensing. They worked closely with the police licensing officer to give advice and manage occupancy numbers to make sure the event could be managed safely.

The service responds to licensing and building consultations on time

The service responds to all building consultations on time. This means it consistently meets its statutory responsibility to comment on fire safety arrangements at new and altered buildings. In 2022/23, Northamptonshire completed 99.2 percent of building consultations in the required time frame. It received 524 building regulation consultations and responded to 520 within the timescales.

The service had responded to all licensing consultations. In 2022/23, the service completed 100.0 percent of the 169 licensing consultations it received in the required time frame.

The service is working with businesses to promote fire safety

The service proactively works with local businesses and other organisations to promote compliance with fire safety legislation. The service's website has a dedicated protection area, which includes free tools, guidance and interactive e-packages for users to complete and use. The service told us that since the website was created, it has been accessed over 20,000 times by members of the public.

Unwanted fire signals continue to be below the national average

An effective risk-based approach is in place to manage the number of unwanted fire signals. The service is receiving more automatic fire alarm requests (AFAs) over time. Control operators have effective call challenging procedures to help filter out unwanted calls, and this results in fewer mobilisations for AFAs. For example:

- In the 12 months up to September 2023, 34.13 percent of emergency calls were AFAs (4,025 out of 11,792 emergency calls).
- In 2022/23, 57.27 percent of calls weren't attended by the service (2,305 out of 4,025 AFAs) – this is below the average national rate across fire and rescue services of 38.49 percent.

Having fewer unwanted calls increases the availability of fire engines to respond to genuine incidents rather than responding to false ones. It also reduces the risk to the public if fewer fire engines travel at high speed on the roads.

The service's emergency cover review identified that the unwanted fire signal process could be made more efficient. We look forward to seeing how the service will adopt and consider the review's recommendations.

Responding to fires and other emergencies

Adequate

Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service is adequate 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 in their areas.

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure its response strategy provides the most appropriate response and wholetime and on-call availability, in line with its community risk management plan.

The service should make sure it has an effective system in place to learn from operational incidents and exercises.

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

Main findings

The service's response strategy needs to be more aligned with the CRMP and emergency cover review

The service's response strategy isn't clearly linked to the risks it has identified in its CRMP. It couldn't always explain the rationale for the location of all its fire engines and response staff, and working patterns. For example, we found that:

- the service couldn't provide a rationale as to why its response standard is set at 10 minutes to all incidents;
- it doesn't always meet its response standard; and
- on-call availability isn't meeting its target of 85 percent.

Encouragingly, in 2023/24, the service completed an emergency fire cover review. This gave the service assurance that its wholetime stations are well placed to respond flexibly to fires and other emergencies.

The review has allowed the service to have a better understanding of how many fire engines and response staff it needs, and what working patterns are best, to respond flexibly to current and future risk. We look forward to seeing this work progress.

The service can't explain its rationale for its response standard

There are no national response standards of performance for fire and rescue services for the public. But the service has set out its own response standards in its CRMP. It states that in the financial year 2022/23, its average response time to all types of incident would be within 10 minutes of a call, with a safe and proportionate response.

We found that the service couldn't explain the rationale for its "10-minute average to all incidents" response standard, following the previous fire cover review in 2019.

In addition, the service doesn't always meet its standards. Data that the service gave us shows that, in 2022/23, the response standard achieved was 10 minutes and 14 seconds.

We note that the service's average response time to primary fires was 10 minutes and 8 seconds. The service is 21 seconds better than the benchmark for the average time for significantly rural services, which is 10 minutes and 29 seconds.

The service's rolling average response for secondary fires is 10 minutes and 24 seconds. This is 33 seconds better than the average response time to secondary fires by significantly rural services in 2022/23, which was 10 minutes and 57 seconds. So, for both primary and secondary fires, its response time is better than the national average for significantly rural services, but it isn't meeting its own target.

However, service data shows that the attendance to RTCs is consistently longer on average than the attendance to primary fires, often with the longest distances to travel. And this shows that for incidents involving RTCs, the service isn't meeting its average response standard.

In 2023/24, service data shows that the average response time to RTCs was:

- 11 minutes and 51 seconds in quarter 1;
- 11 minutes and 48 seconds in quarter 2;
- 12 minutes and 15 seconds in quarter 3; and
- 10 minutes and 56 seconds in quarter 4.

The service therefore isn't meeting its average response standard for RTCs either.

We note that the service has made progress in improving how it understands and reports its performance data. But we found that it could be more accurate and clearer in how it communicates what response times mean for the service the public receives. The service should make sure its response strategy provides the most appropriate response for the public in line with its CRMP.

The service has taken steps to improve the availability of on-call stations, but it continues to decline

To support its response strategy, the service's target for on-call availability is 85 percent. However, service data shows that its overall availability for 2023/24 was 66.5 percent, with wholetime availability at 100 percent and on-call availability at 50.7 percent. This had decreased from the previous year, in which data shows overall availability was 70 percent, with wholetime availability at 100 percent and on-call availability at 55.8 percent.

The service has taken steps to try and consistently meet its on-call availability target of 85 percent and to make sure these fire engines are in the most suitable locations.

It has identified "strategic" fire stations where the county faces the most risk. The service prioritises staffing in these locations. By aligning more closely to risk, it has been able to reduce the number of "banked" fire engines from 18 to 14. This makes it easier to staff fire engines and maintain availability across fewer stations and at a reduced cost to the public.

It is using pacesetter meetings to closely monitor the number of fire engines and the number of firefighters available to staff them. These meetings identify whether any extended travel times will contribute to increased response times. The service takes action when needed.

It has established 12 community risk group watch manager posts to manage on-call availability. These watch managers can work at different on-call stations to help bolster the crew numbers, which reduces the number of times the fire engine isn't available.

It uses "banked shifts contracts" to provide extra firefighter cover at on-call stations. These are a type of overtime payment.

When an on-call fire engine may not have enough crew to staff it but firefighters are available elsewhere, the service can combine on-call crews from different stations to make a full crew. These are called scratch crews.

Despite these efforts, the availability of on-call stations is below the standard set by the service. The service should improve the availability of its on-call crewed fire engines to respond to incidents in line with its CRMP.

The emergency cover review has identified how the service could develop its response standards and availability. Implementation of the review's recommendations could enhance how the service approaches risk and addresses the risk identified in its CRMP. We look forward to seeing the progress of this work.

Staff have a good understanding of how to command incidents safely

The service has trained incident commanders and assesses them regularly and properly. It makes sure incident commanders are up to date with their competency accreditation. This helps the service safely and effectively manage the whole range of incidents it could face, from small and routine ones to complex multi-agency incidents.

As part of our inspection, we interviewed incident commanders from across the service. 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).

Control staff continue to be involved in exercise, training and debrief activity

We were pleased to see that the service's control staff are involved in its command, training, exercise, debrief and assurance activity. We found evidence of control staff being invited to and contributing to operational learning. The service is making progress to align control policies to national operational guidance.

The service has invested in new hardware for mobile data terminals

In the last inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should make sure its mobile data terminals (MDTs) are reliable, so firefighters can readily access up-to-date risk information.

During this inspection, we sampled a range of risk information from the service's central database, from fire engine MDTs and from fire control. This included information in place for firefighters responding to incidents at high-risk, high-rise buildings and the information held by fire control.

The service has invested in new hardware for MDTs. The information we reviewed was up to date and detailed. Staff can easily access and understand it. Encouragingly, we found that it had been completed with input from the service's prevention, protection and response functions when appropriate. The service told us that it is updating the software for MDTs in 2024. We look forward to seeing these improvements.

With these findings, we are satisfied the service has addressed this area for improvement.

The service has suitable arrangements to make sure it aligns to national operational guidance and learning

As part of this inspection, we reviewed a range of emergency incidents and training events. These included building fires, multi-agency exercises, and wide-area flooding which was declared a major incident. We found that the current operational learning system was inefficient. Staff found it difficult to retrieve debrief information, which led to some inconsistencies.

We found that staff had little awareness of the learning that came from exercises and there were inconsistencies in how the service records smaller training events. The service should make sure it has an effective system to learn from operational incidents and exercises.

Despite not having an effective system in place to learn from incidents and exercises, we found that staff were knowledgeable about the learning identified from incidents. We found evidence of actions being identified in debriefs and the service responding to improve the way it serves the public.

We are pleased to see the service follows its policies to make sure staff command incidents in line with national operational guidance. It updates internal risk information with the information it receives. And it exchanges this information when reasonable with appropriate organisations, such as Northamptonshire Police and East Midlands Ambulance Service.

The service has responded to learning from terrorist incidents to improve its service to the public. For example, the service has included recommendations and actions from the Manchester Arena Inquiry in its service improvement plan.

We note that the service has identified and has funding to procure a replacement operational learning system. The service told us that the new system will maximise the ability to share lessons internally and across partner agencies, police, fire and rescue service and local resilience forum platforms. We look forward to seeing this progress.

The service isn't consistent at keeping the public informed during incidents

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

- The corporate communications team is a joint resource that also supports the PFCC and is responsible for updating and managing social media platforms and prevention messaging.
- The service's information team administers the public-facing website with updates, and the service has an external contract jointly with the PFCC to support the maintenance of its website.
- The corporate communication team provides an "out of hours" media service as part of a resilience arrangement.

For incidents that significantly affect the public, the service works with partners as part of the local resilience forum to share information about major incidents.

However, although the service has these functions in place to help manage external communications to the public, they aren't as effective as they could be. Staff told us that the service isn't part of a warn and inform group, though the service told us this is considered as part of the wider local resilience forum governance.

We found that the service couldn't provide sufficient evidence that it consistently and reasonably warns the public of incidents. We note that the corporate communications team is under-resourced. Staff there told us that there was pressure to provide additional support to senior leadership and the PFCC's office due to recent leadership changes.

As a result, we found that the service couldn't provide evidence of how it regularly updates the public on ongoing incidents, not just larger incidents. And we found that it could be missing opportunities to link prevention safety advice to ongoing incidents to keep the public safe.

Responding to major and multi-agency incidents

Good

Northamptonshire 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).

Innovative practice

The service's joint operations team responds effectively to high-threat, high-harm incidents

The service has a joint operations team, which is co-located with Northamptonshire Police at the Mereway office. The team has immediate access to intelligence and risk information, and monitors incidents in both fire and police control rooms. This improves the operational response to and situational awareness of high-threat, high-harm incidents across both police and fire assets.

An important benefit is the ability to combine specialist capabilities across both agencies in a co-ordinated way. This has reduced response times and the number of resources required.

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

Main findings

The service is well prepared to respond to major and multi-agency incidents

We found the service had 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 CRMP 2022–25. The service has effective means of declaring a major incident and responding to it.

It is also familiar with the significant risks neighbouring fire and rescue services may face, and which it might reasonably be asked to respond to in an emergency. The service has access to risk information from neighbouring services up to 10 km from its borders on both its MDTs and via Resilience Direct.

The service has improved staff awareness of terrorist incidents

In the last inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should make sure it is well prepared to form part of a multi-agency response to a terrorist incident, and that its procedures for responding are understood by all staff and are well tested.

In this inspection, we considered how the service has communicated its major incident plan. We found that staff had a good awareness of terrorist procedures, and all commanders in the service had completed an online training package on the new joint operating principles (JOPS 3) for responding to a marauding terrorist attack incident. We are satisfied the service has addressed this area for improvement.

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

In our last inspection, we focused on how the service had collected risk information and responded to the Government's building risk review programme for tall buildings.

In this inspection, we focused on how well prepared the service is to respond to a major incident at a tall building, such as the tragedy at Grenfell Tower.

The service has well-developed policies and procedures in place for safely managing this type of incident. Staff at all levels understand them, and robust training and exercising has taken place to test them. For example, fire control was able to demonstrate consistently how it exchanged risk information with neighbouring services on high-rise buildings.

At this type of incident, a fire and rescue service would receive a high volume of simultaneous fire calls. We found that the service's systems are robust enough to receive and manage this volume of calls. Staff at the incident and in the emergency control room and assisting control rooms can share, view and update the actions that result from the individual fire calls.

Fire control was able to show us how Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service can jointly operate the mobilising system to support Northamptonshire in giving callers fire survival guidance. We found that advice was consistent and aligned to Northamptonshire's high-rise and evacuation plans using action cards.

The service can work effectively with other fire and rescue services

The service supports other fire and rescue services responding to emergency incidents. It has seven neighbouring services, and we saw evidence of routine cross-border working. It is interoperable with these services and can form part of a multi-agency response. For example, the service has a high-volume pump staffed at Corby which has been used to support national flooding incidents.

The service has successfully deployed to other services. During Storm Babet, specialist water rescue teams from both Mereway and Wellingborough were used to support neighbouring services as part of national resilience plans put in place during the adverse weather conditions. The crews helped rescue residents from flooded motorhomes and safely relocated them to a nearby leisure centre.

The service prioritises cross-border and multi-agency exercising

The service has a cross-border exercise plan with neighbouring fire and rescue services, helping them work together effectively to keep the public safe. The plan includes the risks of major events at which the service could foreseeably give support or ask for help from neighbouring services.

We were encouraged to see the service uses feedback from multi-agency exercises to inform its risk information and service plans. However, in the local exercises that we reviewed, we found that learning could have been identified and recorded more consistently.

During 2022/23, the service completed 40 multi-agency training exercises, 5 national resilience training exercises and 36 training exercises with neighbouring fire and rescue services. This represents 207.6 joint training exercises completed per 1,000 firefighters, which is above the national rate of 92.5. This shows that the service has strong links with neighbouring services and multi-agency partners.

Incident commanders have a good understanding of JESIP

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

The service gave us strong evidence that it consistently follows these principles. And most staff showed a good understanding of nationally recognised messaging protocols, joint airwave channels and specialist roles available to support the incident commander.

We sampled a range of debriefs the service had carried out after multi-agency incidents. We were encouraged to find that the service is identifying any problems it has with applying JESIP and taking appropriate action with other emergency services.

But we found that not all staff understand what learning is identified from exercises. The service should assure itself it has a consistent way to share exercise and incident learning with all staff.

The service works well with other partner organisations

The service has good arrangements in place to respond to emergencies with partners that make up the Northamptonshire local resilience forum. These arrangements include working closely with Northamptonshire Police and East Midlands Ambulance Service on developing and testing multi-agency plans.

The service is a valued partner represented by staff at all levels. It takes part in regular training events with other members of the local resilience forum and uses the learning to develop planning assumptions about responding to major and multi-agency incidents. For example, it took part in Exercise Callicarpa which tested how it would respond to and neutralise a chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear threat involving an unknown chemical substance.

The service continues to use national learning to inform its planning

The service makes sure it knows about national operational learning updates from other fire and rescue services, and joint organisational learning from other organisations such as the police service and ambulance trusts. It uses this learning to inform planning assumptions that it makes with these partner organisations.

We found that the current operational learning system could be more efficient in accessing and sharing data. We note that the service is developing a joint organisational learning system with the local resilience forum, police and other partners. We look forward to seeing the outcome of this work.

Making best use of resources

Adequate

Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service is adequate at making best use of its resources.

Fire and rescue services should manage their resources properly and appropriately, aligning them with their risks and statutory responsibilities. Services should make best possible use of resources to achieve the best results for the public.

The service's revenue budget for 2024/25 is £31.434m. This is a 6.3 percent increase from the previous financial year.

Area for improvement

The service should have effective measures in place to assure itself that its workforce is productive and that their time is used as efficiently and effectively as possible to meet the priorities in its community risk management plan.

Promising practice

The service's procurement arrangements improve value for money

As part of the service's collaboration with the Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner and Northamptonshire Police, a single commercial team oversees all procurement activities. This has improved the service's value for money.

The commercial team employs procurement specialists with expertise in commercial law. The specialists monitor supplier performance to make sure the service receives goods and services as per the contracts it has agreed. They benchmark costs with other fire and rescue services and police forces. And they advise the service about market conditions, so it can design tenders better to meet its requirements. The specialists now scrutinise lower-value tenders (above £25,000) whereas previously only tenders above £100,000 were subject to formal procurement arrangements.

A single procurement process improves purchasing power and reduces costs. For example, the service reduced the unit cost of buying mobile data terminals through joint procurement with Northamptonshire Police. And through testing the market, the service told us it saved £85,000 with its thermal image camera contract.

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

Main findings

The service's financial plans support its objectives, but improvement plans have been delayed

The service's financial plans are linked to the objectives in its CRMP. It has completed substantial work to understand how it uses its resources and how it can manage risk more efficiently. The scope of this work included response, prevention and protection activities, as well as how the service could improve the productivity of staff.

As a result, the service has evaluated its mix of crewing and duty systems, and it has analysed its response cover. It has also identified several areas where it can make improvements and use resources more efficiently. For example, it has increased resources in the specialist prevention team by two staff, but it could make better use of its firefighters to carry out prevention work.

The service also relies on high levels of pre-arranged overtime to fill gaps in staffing. During 2022/23, its pre-arranged overtime cost was £2,500 per head of workforce, which is higher than the England rate of £800. Included in this overtime figure are "banked" shifts. The service uses banked shifts to provide extra firefighter cover at on-call fire stations.

The service builds its financial plans on sound scenarios. They help make sure the service's plans are sustainable and are underpinned by financial controls that are overseen by an accountability board. These reduce the risk of misusing public money.

The service needs to do more to make sure its workforce is productive

We were pleased to see that the service's arrangements for managing performance clearly link resource use to its CRMP and its strategic priorities. Each department uses "scorecards" to monitor performance. And each head of group completes quality assurance reports on a quarterly basis. The senior leadership team reviews these reports.

Having completed the emergency cover review, the service has a better understanding of how it uses its wholetime firefighters. However, it doesn't collect data on how they spend their time across day and night shifts. And it doesn't make the most of its capacity. For example, operational crews aren't used to support fire protection activities.

The service should do more to make sure its workforce is as productive as possible. This includes considering new ways of working. For example, it could use operational crews more productively in prevention work by:

- supporting specialist prevention staff to reduce the backlog of HFSV contact lists; and
- targeting the most vulnerable people in the community who are very high and high risk.

We found the service's performance management of prevention was open to manipulation. Low-risk HFSVs were recorded as high risk, and this contributed to the total numbers recorded on the station's scorecards. The service could be more effective in quality assuring this work to make sure that HFSVs are targeted and recorded at the correct risk level.

Collaboration continues to be a service priority with positive outcomes

We were pleased to see the service meets its statutory duty to collaborate. It routinely considers opportunities to collaborate with other emergency responders. We found that extensive work continues with Northamptonshire Police and the Office of the PFCC. A new joint cultural change team has been formed. There are also shared back-office functions across estates, finance, fleet, HR and IT.

The service has prioritised supporting the introduction of these collaborative teams. It is pleasing to see that the service has introduced a suite of performance indicators for each function. This helps it assure itself that the outcomes are providing the anticipated efficiencies and supporting the priorities in the service's CRMP.

The service comprehensively monitors, reviews and evaluates the benefits and results of its collaborations. It has carried out a full evaluation of the shared back-office functions, covering the period between 2020 and 2023. The work identified the benefits achieved, further improvements that can be made and the next steps needed.

We note that enabling services (including functions such as finance, HR, IT and estates) reviewed its capability and performance. Part of this work involved reviewing projects where it had identified learning that these projects should involve more consultation with staff. We have seen minimal progress in this area.

The service regularly tests its business continuity arrangements

The service has good continuity arrangements in place for areas in which it considers threats and risks to be high. It regularly reviews and tests these threats and risks, so that staff know the arrangements and their associated responsibilities.

We found that the service's operational continuity plan for industrial action had been reviewed and tested regularly. Learning is recorded and used to improve operational resilience.

Continuity plans for fire control include fallback arrangements with Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service.

The service continues to reduce non-pay costs and improve its value for money

The service regularly reviews its expenditure, including its non-pay costs. This scrutiny makes sure the service gets value for money. For example, it regularly reviews the requirements of and progress with its capital programme.

The service is taking steps to make sure it achieves efficiency gains through sound financial management and best working practices. It is doing this in important areas such as estates, fleet and procurement. As part of the service's collaboration with the Office of the PFCC and Northamptonshire Police, a single commercial team oversees all procurement activities. This team benchmarks costs with other fire and rescue services and police forces.

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

Good

Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service is good at making the service 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 they should invest in better services for the public.

Area for improvement

The service needs to assure itself that it is maximising opportunities to improve workforce productivity and develop future capacity through use of innovation, including the use of technology.

Innovative practice

The service is designing its IT infrastructure so it can adapt to future change

As part of the service's collaboration with the Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner and Northamptonshire Police, the digital, data and technology (DDaT) function includes an enterprise architecture team. This team supports the service's transformation plans by:

- mapping its DDaT systems, applications and processes, and how they work together;
- designing and prioritising DDaT projects and investments, so they align with the service's priorities, financial plans and organisational needs, including calculating the total cost of a DDaT solution over its lifetime;
- aiming to find solutions that bring the service's and Northamptonshire Police's DDaT infrastructure closer together to support further collaboration and interoperability; and
- reviewing the use and deployment of technology assets, to support future planning, procurement and value for money.

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

Main findings

Changes of leadership haven't supported the service's future plans

During our inspection, we found that the change and uncertainty in leadership positions hadn't supported the development and delivery of major projects. As a result, the service has delayed the implementation of:

- the emergency cover review;
- the estates master plan;
- existing CRMP priorities such as prevention and mobilising data systems; and
- CRMP 2025–30 development.

The service has carried out planning work to develop recommendations and options. It can demonstrate the possible improvements it could make to the efficiency and effectiveness of the service. It also estimates significant financial savings can be made. This could make a large contribution to covering its anticipated budget shortfall over the next few years. But no decisions have been made.

The service understands its future financial challenges

The service has developed a sound understanding of future financial challenges. It has plans to mitigate its main or significant financial risks. For example, it has inflation contingency funding available which it can use to cover unforeseen pressures.

The assumptions that underpin its plans are relatively robust, realistic and prudent. They take account of the wider external environment and some scenario planning for future spending reductions. The service uses zero-based budgeting. Its sensitivity analysis has helped it to consider the implications of different levels of funding and spending pressures on its financial forecast.

As a result of this work, the service anticipates a budget shortfall between 2025/26 and 2028/29. The service told us that it needs to make decisions on savings options shortly after our inspection. This will give sufficient time to introduce changes and minimise the likelihood of the service using reserves to balance its budget.

The service has plans for using reserves

The service has a sensible plan for using its reserves. It sets its minimum general reserves requirement at £2m or 5 percent of its annual revenue budget, whichever is the highest.

It also has several earmarked reserves for specific purposes. For example, it has a transformation reserve to fund investment in technology and innovation. And it has a smoothing reserve to manage any uncertainties with the timings of proposed savings.

The service has developed ambitious proposals to improve the efficiency of its estate and fleet

The service's estate and fleet strategies have clear links to its CRMP. Both strategies exploit opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness. The service has a phased fire engine replacement programme. And it has carried out a condition survey of its estate so it can prioritise refurbishments and make sure it has appropriate welfare facilities for staff.

We found in our staff survey that 93 percent (138 out of 148) of respondents agreed or tended to agree that they have access to gender-appropriate workplace facilities.

The service regularly reviews these strategies so that it can properly assess the effect any changes in estate and fleet provision, or future innovation, have on risk. It has carried out considerable work in the development of a joint estates master plan with Northamptonshire Police. Alongside the fleet replacement programme and the outcomes from the emergency cover review, it has identified ways to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the service.

We look forward to seeing the results of this work.

The service invests in technology to support change and improve efficiency, but some projects have been delayed

The service has a clear plan for improving its DDaT infrastructure, systems and hardware. It will take time to make all the changes the service has identified. Although some projects have been delayed, we were encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since our last inspection.

The service has replaced or updated its finance, payroll, HR and duty systems. It has improved its cyber and information security. And it has replaced the MDTs on its fire engines.

The service actively considers how changes in technology and future innovation may affect risk. It also plans to exploit opportunities presented by changes in technology to improve efficiency and effectiveness. The enterprise architecture team maps the service's DDaT systems, applications and processes, and how they work together. And it designs and prioritises DDaT projects and investments, so they align with the service's priorities, financial plans and organisational needs.

The service has put in place the capacity and capability it needs to achieve sustainable transformation. And it routinely looks for opportunities to work with others to improve efficiency and provide better services in the future. As a result of its collaboration with Northamptonshire Police, the service has changed from having an IT team with 5.5 full-time equivalent staff to being able to access a DDaT department with 165 staff. This means the service has far greater access to a wider range of DDaT specialists.

However, there have been delays to some key projects, such as the prevention and mobilising systems. We found that prevention staff are hampered in their ability to manage referrals and prioritise risk. Staff are particularly good at problem solving and have designed workarounds to overcome these challenges, but this isn't ideal. And the current arrangements mean the process is paper-based. The service told us that progress with this project is being closely monitored. It will be introducing a test version of the new prevention system shortly after the inspection.

Some staff told us that, at times, it was difficult to contact the right person in the shared support functions to help with a query related to a specific project.

While the service has made considerable DDaT improvements, there is still more to do, and this is why the area for improvement from the last inspection remains.

The service considers some opportunities to generate income

The service considers and exploits some opportunities for generating extra income. Where appropriate, it has secured external funding to invest in improvements to the service it gives the public. For example, it has secured a grant from West Northamptonshire Council for targeted work aimed at when domestic abuse presents an arson risk.

Promoting the right values and culture

Requires improvement

Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at promoting the right values and culture.

Fire and rescue services should have positive and inclusive cultures, modelled by the behaviours of their senior leaders. Services should promote health and safety effectively, and staff should have access to a range of well-being support that can be tailored to their individual needs.

Areas for improvement

The service should assure itself that senior and middle managers are visible and inclusive, and demonstrate the Core Code of Ethics through their behaviours.

The service should formally monitor overtime, secondary contracts and secondary employment to make sure working hours aren't exceeded.

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

Main findings

The service is assured that staff understand the culture, behaviours and values they should demonstrate

The service continues to have well-defined and understood values. It has implemented the Core Code of Ethics well, and staff understand it. We found most staff at junior levels of the service showed behaviours that reflect service values. But this wasn't consistent in middle and senior leadership positions. We were encouraged by the cultural improvements the service had made.

There is a positive working culture in most areas of the service, with staff empowered and willing to challenge poor behaviours when they come across them. For example, the well-publicised events of the previous PFCC's behaviours have left a strong feeling of discomfort with the service. Most staff speak out and challenge poor leadership behaviours.

The joint cultural change team is making progress to develop cultural change

Since our last inspection, the service and Northamptonshire Police have created a joint cultural change team in enabling services. It is pleasing to see that this team is well resourced with the right skills and capabilities to support the scale and pace of change required.

This team has successfully managed a review of the service's culture called 'serving with pride' and incorporated its findings into a cultural action plan. A people and culture board oversees this work and provides scrutiny. We found that the service was making good progress against the actions. Staff told us that the people and culture board members reflect all workforce groups and areas of the service.

Although the service has consulted staff on their views – such as about the serving with pride campaign – the board makes decisions and then communicates them to staff. There is little evidence to show how staff are part of the decision-making process or how they can contribute to people and culture board meetings at a strategic level. The board would benefit from greater representation from staff groups with protected characteristics to support more informed decision-making.

Staff felt that some senior leaders don't always act as positive role models

In our last inspection we identified as an area for improvement that the service should assure itself that middle managers are visible and demonstrate service values through their behaviours. Since we issued this area for improvement, the service has clarified that it doesn't have its own separate set of behaviours, but it follows those of the Core Code of Ethics.

In this inspection, we found that some middle and senior leaders act as positive role models. For example, staff told us that some strategic leaders are considered open, transparent and approachable. Staff welcomed the approach, visibility and values demonstrated by the previous acting chief fire officer.

However, it was disappointing to find that some staff felt that some senior leaders (area manager and above) don't always act as positive role models. We found repeated examples of poor values, culture and behaviour among senior leaders and also in middle manager roles.

Members of enabling services told us that they don't feel a valued part of the senior leadership team and at times their opinions aren't considered. They perceive this to be due to not having an operational background and/or identifying as a woman in most cases.

Some staff told us that some managers had poor integrity and had misused their personal information in the past. This resulted in a lack of trust, and some staff didn't feel comfortable coming forward to update their personal information on the HR system and in the 'safe to say' campaign.

Middle managers hadn't supported positive action and had become barriers in some instances.

Senior leaders had answered phone calls during promotion interviews.

There was a lack of visibility among senior leaders.

While some progress has been made, there is more to be done to improve the values, culture and behaviours of some middle and senior leaders.

The service provides a good range of well-being support services for staff

The service continues to have well-understood and effective well-being policies in place, which are available to staff. It was pleasing to see that in our staff survey, 74 percent (109 out of 148) of respondents agreed or tended to agree that they achieve a good balance between their work and private life.

A significant range of well-being support is available to support both physical and mental health. Staff report that the welfare arrangements and reasonable adjustments to support their mental health and well-being are improving. This included improved contact during long-term sickness absence.

There are good provisions in place to promote staff well-being. In our staff survey, 93 percent (138 out of 148) of respondents agreed or tended to agree that they feel able to access services to support their mental well-being. Most staff reported they understand and have confidence in the well-being support processes available.

We found that the service has a well-trained well-being team that is available to support staff with mental health concerns. Staff spoke positively about this team. However, control staff told us that their welfare isn't always considered following traumatic incidents.

The service has a mobile welfare unit for incidents, which is a shared asset with Northamptonshire Police. We found staff had a perception that this wasn't always available due to its location at an on-call fire station. They also perceived that it was being used by the police. As a result, we found incident commanders rarely requested the vehicle to support operational incidents. The service should improve the awareness around incident ground welfare.

We heard many accounts of how the service's pace of change management is at times negatively affecting staff members' mental health. Staff told us this had been made worse by enabling services poorly communicating these changes.

The service has a strong health and safety culture

The service continues to have effective and well-understood health and safety policies and procedures in place. It has a robust training programme to support a systematic approach to reporting, recording and investigating accidents and near misses.
For example:

- New members of staff complete an induction.
- There is a three-yearly e-learning understanding health and safety course.
- Crew/watch commanders complete accredited Institution of Occupational Safety and Health training.
- Station commanders complete accredited National Examination Board in Occupational Safety and Health training.

We found strong evidence of how the service identifies learning and actions the recommendations from investigations. The service uses this to inform future practice and reduce the likelihood of re-occurrences.

These policies and procedures are readily available, and the service promotes them effectively to all staff. Both staff and representative bodies have confidence in the health and safety approach the service takes.

The service needs to improve the way it monitors staff working hours

In the last inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should formally monitor overtime and secondary contracts to make sure staff don't exceed working hours.

In this inspection, we found that the service hasn't made sufficient progress to monitor staff who have secondary employment or dual contracts to make sure they comply with the secondary employment policy and don't work excessive hours.

The service has more robust absence management processes

In the last inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should make sure it has effective absence and attendance procedures in place.

In this inspection, we found the service has reviewed its absence management processes for all staff, which are effective. There is clear guidance for managers, who are confident in using the processes. The service manages absences well and in accordance with policy. Managers are aware of their welfare and monitoring responsibilities and manage return to work interviews robustly. We were assured that the way managers keep in touch with employees during periods of absence has improved and the service is monitoring modified duties more consistently.

Getting the right people with the right skills

Adequate

Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service is adequate at getting the right people with the right skills.

Fire and rescue services should have a workforce plan in place that is linked to their community risk management plans. It should set out their current and future skills requirements and address capability gaps. This should be supplemented by a culture of continuous improvement, including appropriate learning and development throughout the service.

Areas for improvement

The service should assure itself that managers are appropriately trained for their role, including those involved in grievance, discipline and welfare processes.

The service should make sure it has effective arrangements in place to manage its workforce plan, supported by the appropriate departments and roles. It should take full account of the skills and capabilities it needs to implement its community risk management plan.

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

Main findings

Workforce planning could be more co-ordinated across functions

The service has good workforce planning in place. This makes sure skills and capabilities align with what the service needs to effectively carry out its CRMP. For example, the service regularly reviews and monitors its workforce plan 2023–28 using a PESTELO analysis. We found meaningful forward planning which clearly linked to financial plans.

The service consistently scrutinises workforce and succession planning via regular meetings to discuss requirements. It has introduced a workforce planning group, which meets regularly to review workforce and succession plans. It updates the workforce plan with details from change projects that affect the workforce. The workforce planning group reports to the senior leadership team.

Although the service had good arrangements to identify gaps in capability, we found evidence that some gaps still remain. We found that in these cases it was unclear which function has the responsibility to develop and manage these capabilities. This is the case where service development, enabling services and community risk have shared accountability; for example:

- arrangements for discipline and grievance training for managers;
- media training for incident commanders;
- formal training for recruitment panel staff, such as unconscious bias training; and
- prevention training for operational crews.

The service needs to do more to improve the way its teams co-ordinate and develop workforce plans together to reduce the gaps identified in the workforce plan.

The service is improving workforce skills and capabilities but has yet to implement some plans

Training plans make sure the service can maintain competence and capability effectively. Most staff told us that they could access the training they need to be effective in their role. The service's core skill competency framework considers specialist as well as operational skills, such as level 1–4 safeguarding training for prevention team leader roles.

Of the staff who responded to our survey, 39 percent (57 of 148) agreed that they have received sufficient training to effectively do their job. And 34 percent (50 of 148) tended to agree that they have received sufficient training to effectively do their job.

The service monitors staff competence using a centralised training system. It regularly updates its understanding of staff skills and risk-critical safety capabilities. We found that managers were confident in the system, were given monthly training and were actively using it to maintain their teams' skills and capabilities.

We reviewed a range of training records and found that:

- staff completed safety critical training within timescales;
- managers were able to easily identify any training competencies before they expired; and
- managers used this information to prioritise and plan training for firefighters.

We found that the service had re-evaluated its safety-critical training and introduced a training planner. This included themes on different months to make sure all national occupational standards are covered, with a clear link to national operational guidance.

This approach means the service can identify gaps in workforce capabilities and resilience. It also means it can make sound and financially sustainable decisions about current and future needs.

However, some staff told us that they didn't feel confident in the skills and capabilities of managers when completing discipline and grievance investigations. We were pleased to see that the service had acknowledged this gap in its plans. But it has yet to implement any formal training.

The service has a culture of continuous improvement

The service promotes a culture of continuous improvement throughout the organisation, encouraging staff to learn and develop. For example, it has a 'levels of leadership' programme which is available to all relevant staff. This is aimed at junior and middle management roles, with the ambition to improve leadership skills and further develop managers in their roles.

We were pleased to see that the service has a range of resources in place. The workforce development team is collaborating with Northamptonshire Police's organisational leadership development team to offer a wider range of development opportunities. For example, there is a course called 'courageous conversations', which has objectives that help staff understand how to deal with conflict and challenging behaviours. These objectives include:

- how to give effective feedback and listen objectively without making assumptions;
- how individuals could be triggered, and how to explore methods of regulating responses; and
- the role of emotional intelligence and how it can support conversations.

Most staff told us they can access a range of learning and development resources, such as for mentoring and coaching. This allows them to do their job effectively.

Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity

Requires improvement

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

Creating a more representative workforce gives fire and rescue services huge benefits. These include greater access to talent and different ways of thinking. It also helps them better understand and engage with local communities. Each service should make sure staff throughout the organisation firmly understand and show a commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion. This includes successfully taking steps to remove inequality and making progress to improve fairness, diversity and inclusion at all levels of the service. It should proactively seek and respond to feedback from staff and make sure any action it takes is meaningful.

Cause of concern

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

Recommendations

The service should improve equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) by:

- working with staff to develop clear EDI objectives and training to increase awareness of EDI and its importance across the organisation;
- developing effective ways to show how it monitors and evaluates EDI objectives, including understanding and addressing the effect positive action has on staff;
- making sure it has robust processes in place to do equality impact assessments and reviewing any actions agreed as a result;
- making improvements to the way it collects equality data to better understand its workforce demographics and needs; and
- supporting staff and managers to confidently challenge and manage inappropriate behaviour.

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

Main findings

The service needs to do more work to develop and establish a culture that supports EDI

In our last inspection, we identified as a cause of concern that the service hasn't made enough progress to improve EDI.

Since then, the service has developed an action plan to address the cause of concern. We recognise the considerable work that has been carried out to support the necessary improvements, but there is still more work to do for the benefits to be realised.

After reviewing the action plan, the service has established effective governance arrangements. The chief fire officer now scrutinises progress through the people and culture board. But we found that the service has limited representation from staff groups that can help support effective decision-making.

The service has invested in a cultural change team of 12 people, to manage the action plan and bring about cultural change. This includes two staff dedicated to positive action. However, staff gave us examples of middle managers being a barrier to progressing positive action. The cultural team has developed a positive action strategy, which we highlighted in our last inspection. Disappointingly, the service hasn't yet implemented it. As a result, there is slow progress in improving diversity in recruitment processes.

We also recognise the service's increased focus on improving EDI. It has worked with staff to increase awareness of the Core Code of Ethics through a 'serving with pride' cultural review. It has integrated findings and recommendations into the action plan.

The service has updated how it manages equality impact assessments, and these now align to the NFCC framework and guidance. We note that assessments are completed for each new or reviewed policy. However, this wasn't the case for strategies and some projects. The equality impact assessment we reviewed lacked detail and made limited use of data to inform outcomes.

The service has taken action to assure itself that equality data is more accurate, via a 'safe to say' campaign. It contacted all staff to ask them to update their personal information and has recorded this on a new HR system. We found that the service had received a lower return than expected from staff as some were reluctant to give information due to concerns about how it would be used. The service should do more to improve the workforce's understanding of how data is used, which should help to improve trust.

We found some good evidence of staff confidently challenging and managing inappropriate behaviour using the new independent reporting systems called 'flag it' and 'speak up'. Disappointingly, we found that some staff with protected characteristics didn't report bullying, harassment or discrimination due to concerns about confidentiality or being victimised.

We recognise that the organisational structure and strategic intent to encourage EDI and cultural change has improved since the last inspection. But in this inspection, we found the service still hasn't made enough progress to improve EDI. We look forward to seeing what progress the service makes in this area.

The service has improved how it asks for and acts on staff feedback

In our last inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should make sure it properly addresses problems identified through staff feedback processes and communicates any actions to staff in a timely way.

Since then, the service has been addressing matters staff have raised. And staff have received these actions positively. The service has developed several ways to work with staff on issues and decisions that affect them. These include methods to build all-staff awareness of fairness and diversity. There are also targeted initiatives to identify matters that affect different staff groups, such as the 'serving with pride' campaign.

However, staff told us that they have limited confidence in the enabling services feedback processes. Representative bodies told us that they would like better communication from and consultation with the service. We note that enabling services evaluated their performance and identified this as a challenge, but limited work has been done to improve this situation.

The workforce doesn't understand the bullying, harassment and discrimination procedures

The service should improve staff understanding of bullying, harassment and discrimination, including their duty to eliminate them. In our staff survey, 16 percent (24 out of 148) of staff told us they had been subject to bullying or harassment, and 15 percent (22 out of 148) to discrimination at work over the past 12 months.

Of those who said they felt bullied or harassed, the main reasons most respondents didn't report it was due to concerns about confidentiality, being victimised and it making the situation worse.

Since our 'Values and culture in fire and rescue services' report, the service has realigned its bullying and harassment policy to form part of the renewed grievance policy. We found this information to be diluted and lacking detail on bullying, harassment, victimisation and discrimination.

During this inspection, most staff told us that they are unsure of where to locate information on bullying, harassment, victimisation and discrimination, and were unaware of the policies and procedures in place. The service has used leadership courses and courageous conversations to make sure all staff are trained and clear about what to do if they encounter inappropriate behaviour.

Although the service is improving its approach to grievances and discipline processes, staff have limited confidence in how well it can deal with cases of bullying, harassment and discrimination. Staff with a protected characteristic told us that they aren't confident in raising concerns.

The service takes a firm stance on misconduct

In our last inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should make sure its policies used to handle grievance and discipline cases are applied in a consistent and timely manner across the workforce, that staff have confidence in the processes, and that those involved in these processes are appropriately trained.

As part of this inspection, we examined discipline and grievance processes. We found that the service takes a firm stance on misconduct. For example:

- The service has a brigade investigation officer to co-ordinate ongoing investigations, including monitoring the process and oversight to make sure recommendations are actioned.
- HR business partners make sure the investigation process is consistent, timely and fair.
- Outcomes are based on evidence-based decisions.
- The service has established an independent investigatory service provision for misconduct cases.

However, we found that the service doesn't provide sufficient training to managers to support them with grievance cases, discipline investigations or welfare support. We note that it has organised some awareness sessions for managers, to support their understanding of discipline and grievance. HR business partners are available to support investigators.

We have therefore closed this area for improvement. But the service should make sure its workforce plans and training strategy include formal discipline, grievance and welfare training for managers.

The service's recruitment and retention processes are improving slowly

There is an open, fair and honest recruitment process for staff or those wishing to work for the fire and rescue service.

The service has an effective system to understand and remove the risk of disproportionality in recruitment processes. For example, its recruitment toolkit uses workforce composition data and applicant history to make sure the selection process is fair and avoids discrimination.

The service has put considerable effort into developing its recruitment processes so that they are fair and potential applicants can understand them. It has renewed its recruitment and selection policy, which is comprehensive and covers opportunities in all roles.

The service advertises recruitment opportunities both internally and externally. The e-recruitment site that the service uses to advertise and receive applications is compatible with software recommended by the Royal National Institute of Blind People. Statistical reporting and review are in place.

This is starting to encourage applicants from diverse backgrounds, including into middle and senior management roles.

The service hasn't done enough to increase staff diversity and encourage positive action

The service knows it needs to do more to increase diversity at all levels in the workforce. There has been limited progress to improve ethnic and gender diversity. As at 31 March 2023, Northamptonshire had 509 members of staff. The service needs to do more to be representative of the community it serves.

For the service's whole workforce in 2022/23, 6.4 percent (20 people) were from an ethnic minority background. In 2021/22, this was 5.4 percent (19 people), which is a decrease of 1 person. This is lower than the local population of 21.6 percent.

In 2022/23, 16.2 percent (82 people) of the service's workforce identified as a woman, compared to an average of 19.4 percent throughout all fire and rescue services in England. In 2021/22, this was 18.4 percent (97 people), which is a decrease of 15, including 11 firefighters who identified as women.

The workforce's understanding of positive action has improved since the last inspection. But we found limited evidence to show what the service had done to address disproportionality in recruitment, retention and promotion processes. In 2022/23, 17 percent of new joiners to the service were from ethnic minority backgrounds.

The service had developed a positive action strategy, but disappointingly this hadn't been implemented, and the service is unsure of the effect of this work on recruitment.

We note the recruitment of senior women to leadership roles, including an area manager and chief fire officer. We also acknowledge that staff who identify as a woman, such as enabling services, who are on police contracts, are part of the make-up of the senior leadership team. However, it is unclear how this links to current plans. It is also unclear when positive action strategies will be implemented to address this more widely.

The service needs to do more work to make equality analysis more consistent and robust

Since the last inspection, the service has improved its approach to EDI. It now has an effective template to assess equality impact that aligns to the NFCC template and guidance. The service has introduced two EDI leads, and we found that all new and renewed policies must have an equality impact assessment. But we found that this wasn't replicated for strategies and some projects, which left gaps in understanding.

Although the service has a process in place to assess equality impact, it doesn't properly assess or act on the impact on each protected characteristic. The equality impact assessments we reviewed lacked detail, and there was an absence of data analysis or actions made. The service assures itself that its equality impact assessments are consistent and legitimate.

Managing performance and developing leaders

Adequate

Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service is adequate 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 staff and improving diversity into leadership roles.

Areas for improvement

The service should put in place an open and fair process to identify, develop and support high-potential staff and aspiring leaders.

The service should make sure its selection, development and promotion of staff are open and fair, and it should do more to make sure staff have confidence in promotion and selection processes.

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

Main findings

The service has improved how it manages individual performance

In our last inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should improve all staff's understanding and application of the performance development review process to make sure the service uses this to develop talent within the organisation.

Since our last inspection, the service has introduced a new performance management system, which allows it to effectively develop and assess the individual performance of all staff. The process includes more functionalities, including 360-degree feedback, in which feedback is gathered from a staff member's direct reports and peers as well as their manager.

Through our staff survey, 90 percent (133 out of 148) of respondents told us they have had a formal personal development review/appraisal in the last 12 months. Most staff spoke positively about the changes made to assess and develop their performance, including those with specialist skills. They reported that they have regular discussions with their managers and that these are meaningful. Each staff member has individual goals and objectives, and regular performance assessments. Staff feel confident in the performance and development arrangements in place.

Considering the evidence, we have closed the area for improvement.

The service is improving promotion processes, but more needs to be done to make sure staff feel these are fair

The service knows it needs to go further to increase workforce diversity. It has put considerable effort into developing its promotion and progression processes so that they are fair and all staff can understand them. It has introduced talent surgeries where staff can ask questions to better understand the development and promotional pathways. In our staff survey, 64 percent (95 out of 148) of respondents agreed or tended to agree that they are given the same opportunities to develop as other staff in the service.

The service manages selection processes consistently for supervisory roles. But staff told us that the promotion process for middle managers isn't clear or transparent, with extended periods before feedback is received.

When we reviewed recent promotion processes, we were unable to confirm if they were in line with the service's policy, as the service couldn't provide us with all the relevant documentation. Some staff told us that they feel that the selection and promotion processes for senior leadership positions are unfair and biased. They feel that successful candidates are selected based on their relationship with other senior officers.

In our staff survey, 49 percent (73 out of 148) of respondents agreed or tended to agree that the promotion processes in the service are fair.

The service should make sure it has fair and transparent promotional processes in place to manage and develop talent internally and externally to the organisation.

The service could still do more to identify and develop high potential at all levels

In our last two inspections, we identified as an area for improvement that the service needed to put in place a process to identify, develop and support high-potential staff. We found it has since taken some steps to address this, but it could still do more.

The service now has some talent management schemes in place to develop leaders and high-potential staff. It has created a talent management and progression pathway policy that details the types of progression available to all staff. But the organisational structure doesn't help workforce planning link well with other functions in enabling services. This has resulted in inconsistency and leaves a significant gap in the service's succession planning. For example, succession plans don't explore other opportunities such as direct entry schemes.

The service should consider putting in place more formal arrangements to identify and support talented members of staff to become senior leaders. And it should make sure it has an effective system in place for succession planning, including into senior leadership roles.

We note that the service has considered the December 2022 Leading the Service and Leading and Developing People fire standards. These provide useful leadership and staff development frameworks for fire and rescue services. The service should make sure it has effective plans to implement these standards in a timely manner.

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