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

Fire and rescue services 2025–27

Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service

Contents

Overall summary

In our inspection, we assessed how well Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service has performed in ten areas. We have made the following graded judgments:

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

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.

Changes to this round of inspection

We last inspected Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service in February and April 2023. And in August 2023, 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 fourth assessment of the service's effectiveness and efficiency and how well it looks after its people.

In our previous rounds of inspections, we assessed and gave graded judgments for 11 areas. For this inspection programme, we have combined our efficiency areas and reduced the overall number to ten. This is to reduce duplication and concentrate more on outcomes for communities and the workforce. Although we continue to use our five-tier system of judgments, these changes mean it isn't always possible to directly compare grades awarded in this round of inspections with those in previous years.

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

Our inspections provide a rounded assessment of the service. More information on how we assess fire and rescue services and our graded judgments is available on our website.

Terminology in this report

We inspect and report on policing in England and Wales and on fire and rescue services in England only. Our reports contain references to, among other things, 'national' definitions, priorities, policies, systems, responsibilities and processes.

In some instances, 'national' means applying to England and Wales. In others, it means applying to England and Wales and Scotland or the whole of the United Kingdom.

About the data

More information on data and analysis in this report is included in the 'About the data 2025–27' section of our website.

HM Inspector's summary

Cambridgeshire is predominantly rural and covers an area of 1,309 square miles. It has a population of 921,600. The service borders seven other fire and rescue services. The county is a growth area with several major developments and new towns created since the last census. Between the 2011 and 2021 censuses, Cambridge and Peterborough had the fifth and sixth largest percentage growth in their local populations of all areas in England and Wales. This growth brings increased demand and complexity.

Governance for this service is the responsibility of the fire and rescue authority. In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service cost £44.32 per head of population, which is much less than the England average of £51.71. It continues to have comprehensive financial plans that are aligned with its strategic priorities and sustainability strategies, which are achieving value for money for the public.

I am satisfied with some aspects of the performance of Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service, such as how it provides its protection activities and identifies risks. However, there are areas in which the service needs to improve. In particular, it needs to do more to keep people safe and secure from fire and other risks and make sure senior leaders have sufficient strategic oversight of important areas.

Since our 2023 inspection, the service has done enough for us to close six of the eight areas for improvement we identified. Despite this progress, it hasn't made enough improvement since our previous inspection. We recognise that the service has experienced some changes in senior leadership roles. But this inspection has identified 15 new areas for improvement with 2 enduring, indicating the need for greater co-ordination and leadership assurance across the organisation.

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

The service continues to have strong financial management

Its senior leaders continue to operate with strong financial discipline. The service has a sound understanding of future financial challenges and it has plans to mitigate its main financial risks. It makes savings consistently. The service has well-defined structures in place to support the effective implementation of its community risk management plan (CRMP). The CRMP action plan informs day-to-day operations, making sure that activities are aligned with identified risks and prioritised accordingly.

Senior leaders also maintain regular communication through face-to-face briefings and workplace visits, helping to keep staff informed and engaged.

The senior leaders should make sure there are effective oversight arrangements in place

While senior leaders from many teams showed strong intent, effective practices and significant commitment, we identified a consistent theme during this inspection: senior leaders didn’t always maintain effective strategic oversight of important organisational functions. Several areas showed gaps in performance management, including fitness testing, medicals, ensuring fairness and diversity, and the management of operational risk information. Leadership behaviours were also inconsistent, with some leaders not modelling expected standards.

Governance of policy documents requires improvement. Many policies lacked appropriate version control, clear review dates and robust arrangements to make sure information was accurate and up to date. Additionally, home fire safety visits were found to be inconsistent and, in several cases, didn’t meet the service’s own standards. Staff expressed continued frustration with the promotion process, and the service needs to strengthen the resilience, accessibility and reliability of its IT applications.

Overall, there is a clear commitment from staff and senior leaders to improve. The foundations for an effective fire and rescue service exist. To build on these foundations, senior leaders must make sure oversight is stronger, governance is more consistent, and assurance across critical areas is improved. The service is aware of the many issues we found and has plans in place to make improvements.

Lee Freeman KPM

His Majesty’s Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies

Good

Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service is good at understanding risk.

Fire and rescue services should identify and assess all foreseeable fire and rescue-related risks that could affect their communities. They should use their prevention, protection and response capabilities to prevent or mitigate these risks for the public. They should adjust these arrangements as appropriate, following robust feedback, scrutiny and oversight.

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 identifies risk well

The service has assessed a suitable range of risks and threats using a thorough community risk management planning process. In March 2023, the service published a clear assessment-of-risk analysis. In its assessment of risk, it uses information it has collected from a range of internal and external sources and datasets, taking account of both local and national risk registers. The service accesses data from the Office for National Statistics, the Environment Agency and the Met Office. The service also uses internal sources, such as historical incident data.

The service completed an analysis of its activity over the past five years. It shows that its ten busiest days all corresponded to severe weather events, including periods of extreme heat and widespread flooding. This clearly indicates that weather-related incidents represent the service's most significant operational risk.

Cambridgeshire is an economic growth area and has seen several major developments and new towns created since the last census. Between the 2011 and 2021 censuses, Cambridge and Peterborough had the fifth and sixth largest percentage growth in their local populations of all areas in England and Wales. This growth brings increased demand and complexity for the service.

The service has an effective community risk management plan

Once it has assessed risks, the service records its findings in an easily understood plan called the community risk management plan (CRMP). Before introducing its CRMP for 2024–2029, the service communicated with more than 1,000 people to better understand community risks and their impact.

The CRMP sets out the service's four strategic priorities, which are:

- people;
- community safety excellence;
- operational excellence; and
- value for money.

This plan describes how the service intends to use its prevention, protection and response activities to mitigate or reduce the risks and threats its communities face both now and in the future. The service has identified domestic and commercial battery energy storage systems and growth within the county as emerging and future risks. For example, the service told us that an estimated 21,000 homes had been built in Cambridgeshire between 2022 and 2026, with another 64,000 planned for the next few years.

The service has developed a vision 2030 programme aligned to the CRMP. This long-term initiative focuses on making sure that resources are matched to the evolving risk across the community. As part of this work, at the time of our inspection the service had plans to introduce its own risk modelling software, so it could use the data it collected more effectively. This should support evidence-based scenario planning, improved decision-making and more efficient deployment of resources.

In addition, the service has employed a growth officer to understand the growth of Cambridgeshire and surrounding counties. The purpose of the role is to build strong relationships with local authorities and identify opportunities to generate additional income for the service.

The service has identified a large development around Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge, including a major new hospital, multiple outbuildings and housing. It is projected that there will be a big increase in the local population. As a result, the service needs to review and adapt its response model to make sure it aligns resources to the emerging risks. This may involve relocating fire engines or potentially moving its fire station to a more suitable location, as response times are likely to be affected. This will form part of the vision 2030 programme. We look forward to seeing how this develops.

The arrangements described in the CRMP also take account of the issues identified in the service's corporate risk register, which could compromise the implementation of these activities. The risks are clearly categorised, assigned to accountable owners and described with sufficient context to inform senior decision-making. The service identifies resources, the reliance on on-call firefighters, and cyberattacks as very high corporate risks. It provides control measures to mitigate the risks.

Although the corporate risk register is well structured, some risks have remained at elevated levels without clear evidence of progress. Some risks remain static or high despite long-standing recognition. For example, in December 2018 the service identified a risk that its workforce diversity didn't reflect the communities it served. The service recruited for wholetime firefighters in summer 2025, but it carried out limited positive action, as we explain in the section on 'Ensuring fairness and diversity'. In addition, at the time of our inspection, we found risks that should have been on the corporate risk register and weren't.

The service has continuity plans in place to make sure it can continue to provide a minimum level of risk-critical functions during periods of industrial action. The service uses resilience contracts to make sure it always has enough skilled staff and resources available. There is mandatory training for those who are on the resilience register and, at the time of our inspection, the service had recently carried out a table-top exercise to test these arrangements.

The service monitors its CRMP objectives regularly through an effective action plan

Senior leaders have effective monitoring, feedback and scrutiny arrangements in place to make sure the service is achieving the aims set out in the CRMP for prevention, protection and response.

The service has a robust CRMP action plan that is used to track the objectives in the CRMP. Senior leaders review the action plan on a quarterly basis. Additionally, all departmental heads check progress against the CRMP action plan each quarter to make sure the service remains on track to achieve its objectives.

The service produces quarterly strategic performance reports. However, during our inspection, we found that some areas weren't being effectively performance-managed. For example, there was limited corporate oversight of fitness testing and medicals weren't consistently kept up to date.

There are clear governance arrangements in place

To make sure the service is accountable to members of the public and is meeting the commitments it has made to them, it is essential the service has robust oversight and governance arrangements in place. This provides assurance that its plans to reduce or mitigate risk are effective or are being adjusted where they aren't working.

The fire and rescue authority receives regular, meaningful updates on the arrangements the service has in place for prevention, protection and response. This helps it to hold the chief fire officer to account and set priorities for the service, and reduces risk for the public. There are formal governance processes, including quarterly performance reports presented to the authority, which detail progress against prevention, protection and response objectives. The chair of the fire authority sits on various meetings, including programme boards. The service is proposing to further strengthen the governance arrangements. We provide further details in the section on 'Making best use of resources to provide an efficient and affordable service'.

Preventing fires and other risks

Adequate

Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service is adequate at preventing fires and other risks.

Fire and rescue services must promote fire safety, which includes 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, including police and ambulance services. They should share intelligence and risk information with these other organisations when they identify vulnerability or exploitation.

Area for improvement

The service should make sure that it has robust strategic oversight arrangements, and an effective quality assurance process, so that staff consistently carry out home fire safety visits to the required standard.

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 prevention strategy is aligned with its community risk management plan

The service's prevention strategy is clearly aligned with the risks identified in its community risk management plan. The service has identified older adults (those aged 65 and over), people living with disabilities or long-term health conditions, and individuals experiencing social isolation as the groups most at heightened risk of fire. We were told that the county's population was ageing. At the time of the 2021 census, the number of people aged 65 and over accounted for 17.6 percent of the local population (approximately 157,000 people). This is an increase from the 2011 census, when over-65s accounted for 15.5 percent of the local population (approximately 125,000 people).

Leaders responsible for prevention have clearly communicated the strategy and main prevention aims to the workforce. We were pleased to find that prevention staff were consulted on the prevention strategy. As a result, prevention staff understood how they contributed to the prevention aims of the service individually and as a team.

The service's teams work well together and with other relevant organisations on prevention. They share relevant information when needed. The service uses information to adjust its planning assumptions and direct activity between its prevention, protection and response functions. For example, the service works closely with local groups, including members of the Roma community, to share prevention advice, which has led to increased uptake of home fire safety visits (HFSVs). It also runs free older-driver workshops at fire stations for people aged 65 and over, helping them maintain and future-proof their driving skills.

The service targets those at highest risk

The service uses a risk-based approach to clearly prioritise its prevention activity towards people most at risk from fire and other emergencies. In the year ending 31 March 2025, 89.9 percent of HFSVs (7,275 out of 8,095) included at least 1 person with a vulnerability or risk factor. We found that the service was working proactively in this area, and 4,513 visits were targeted. It was also encouraging to see the number of visits had increased from 6,446 in the previous 12 months to 8,095. This is a 20.4 percent increase.

In the weeks leading up to the inspection, the service refined its HFSV process and introduced clear completion timescales, which were being trialled for six months. These are:

- red (high risk): visit within 3 days
- amber (medium risk): visit within 7–14 days
- green (low risk): visit within 21–28 days.

It is too early to determine how effective this revised process is. While we recognise that completing all high-risk HFSVs within 3 days is an ambitious target, the service's November 2025 performance report shows that over the preceding 12-month period, it was taking an average of 12 days to complete high-risk HFSVs. We look forward to hearing the outcomes from the trial.

The service has performance reports covering prevention activity. At the time of our inspection, the service had introduced new data to track outstanding HFSVs and the length of time each visit had been outstanding. Senior leaders should regularly review this information so the service can put appropriate control measures in place to reduce waiting times where necessary.

The safeguarding lead uses professional judgment to prioritise visits based on identified risk. The service should make sure there is a consistent and robust process for prioritising cases. An automated triage system would achieve this.

The service isn't yet making full use of its available resources. It should explore whether wholetime firefighters could carry out HFSVs for higher-risk individuals, rather than limiting their involvement to low and medium-risk visits.

We also found that the service's deployment of firefighters for prevention work needed more structure and oversight. Firefighters told us they were given lists of addresses to target, but these weren't prioritised according to risk.

The service uses a range of information and data to target its prevention activity at vulnerable individuals and groups including those from under-represented communities. For example, we heard from a prevention practitioner who spoke Polish. They worked with the local Polish community and gave HFSV advice and information during a church gathering.

The service should make sure its strategic oversight arrangements in place are robust to make sure that its HFSV records are accurate

We recognise that the service had begun implementing a quality assurance framework at the time of our inspection. Most wholetime watches were subject to HFSV quality assurance checks and initial work had begun to assess the performance of specialist prevention officers. However, several of the HFSV files we reviewed didn't meet the service's own standards. For example:

- high-risk vulnerabilities had been identified, but safeguarding referrals weren't made to partner organisations;
- high-risk occupants received an HFSV, yet there was only limited information recorded on the system about what actions were taken;
- in one case, a fatal and serious fire review wasn't initiated, despite a fire occurring at an address where the occupant had significant vulnerabilities;
- two cases showed occupants waiting more than five months for an HFSV; and
- follow-up visits hadn't been completed, despite this being required in service policies.

We found that staff were recording information during HFSVs using a paper-based system. Additionally, the booklet that staff used wasn't aligned with the digital system into which they later entered details. For example, there were no sections to record individual vulnerabilities identified, such as dementia or hoarding. This increases the risk that important information is missed, recorded inaccurately or transcribed incorrectly during the HFSV process.

We recognise that, at the time of our inspection, a new HFSV process was being trialled for six months and that the service had invested in an assurance and evaluation officer post. There was a project exploring the use of electronic devices to complete HFSVs. The service has provided HFSV training to wholetime firefighters. However, staff aren't completing HFSVs to a consistent standard, which can put vulnerable people at greater risk from fire and other emergencies. The service needs to make sure there are appropriate oversight arrangements in place so that staff consistently carry out HFSVs to the required standard. And it needs to do more to improve its quality assurance process. This is an area for improvement.

The service has clear evaluation processes, but it could strengthen these further

The service has some good evaluation tools in place to measure how effective its activity is and make sure all sections of its communities get appropriate access to the prevention services that meet their needs. For example, it has evaluated its community well-being officer role, fire break programme and some road safety initiatives.

Prevention activities take account of feedback from the public, other organisations and other parts of the service. For example, the service has provided awareness sessions to help partner organisations identify risk, which have been evaluated.

The service uses feedback to inform its planning assumptions and change future activity to make sure it focuses on what its communities need and what works.

While the evaluation and performance reports provide the service with some recognition that prevention work is having a positive impact, it hasn't completed an up-to-date evaluation of its HFSVs to make sure it is effectively reducing risk. For example, it hasn't recently measured whether HFSVs lead to meaningful behaviour change or improvements in fire safety knowledge that contribute to preventing fires.

The service promotes prevention campaigns

The service makes effective use of social media to promote prevention campaigns and aligns its activities with the National Fire Chiefs Council seasonal campaign calendar. We heard how the service supported boat fire safety week. It communicated with boat owners and provided smoke alarms and general fire safety advice to keep them safe.

It previously supported road safety initiatives. However, the local authority has withdrawn funding for a dedicated road safety post. But the service continues to contribute to road safety activity by working with other organisations.

We were told that, from April 2025, the service expected wholetime firefighters to provide community activities. But we found limited and inconsistent evidence that these activities were taking place.

The service collaborates well with others

The service works with a range of other organisations to prevent fires and other emergencies. These include East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust (EEAST), local authorities and utility companies. The service receives HFSV referrals from its partner agencies.

In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service carried out 8,095 HFSVs. The service completed 2,493 HFSVs that were referrals from other agencies and 1,776 that led to the service making an onward referral to at least 1 other organisation.

We found good evidence that it routinely referred people at greatest risk to organisations that may better meet their needs. These organisations include housing agencies, EEAST and a range of local charities that work collaboratively to support the community. Arrangements are also in place to receive referrals from others. And the service has provided training to its partner organisations. The service acts appropriately on the referrals it receives. For example, in any case involving a highly vulnerable person, staff will attempt a physical visit within 72 hours or sooner.

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. The service has an information-sharing agreement in place through the Safer Peterborough Partnership. This consists of organisations such as Peterborough City Council, Cambridgeshire Constabulary and the NHS. The partners routinely share data and information on risk. It has data-sharing agreements in place with EEAST and Anglian Water to make sure that the most vulnerable individuals are identified and provided with the correct level of support.

The service has introduced community well-being officer (CWO) roles, jointly funded by EEAST. These staff provide support to both organisations by attending incidents and helping to reduce risk among the most vulnerable members of the community. For example, the CWOs respond to vulnerable individuals who have fallen.

Falls are known to pose significant risks, particularly for older people. Extended periods spent on the floor after a fall (typically over one hour) are linked to serious injuries, increased hospital admissions and a greater likelihood of long-term care. The CWO role aims to reduce these risks through timely response, appropriate on-scene intervention and preventative measures such as HFSVs.

Staff have a good understanding of safeguarding

Staff we interviewed told us about occasions when they had identified safeguarding problems. The service provides training in identifying safeguarding concerns on its e-learning platform. Staff told us that they felt confident and trained to act appropriately and promptly. For example, firefighters discovered an occupant was overloading their electrical sockets excessively and there were signs of hoarding, among other things. As a result, the service made a safeguarding referral. The service has continued its collaboration with Essex County Fire and Rescue Service, which provides it with safeguarding support and resilience.

The service offers a good range of programmes to address fire-setting behaviours

In the year ending 30 June 2025, the service attended 529 deliberate fires, which was a rate of attendance of 56.5 per 100,000 population. This is lower than the England rate of 125.1.

The service carries out a range of suitable and effective interventions to target and educate people with different needs who show signs of fire-setting behaviour. This includes a fire safety intervention designed to educate young people who display fire-setting behaviours. The service also runs a successful fire break programme – a five-day course – in partnership with local authorities across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

The programme provides a positive alternative learning environment for children involved in youth justice and for young people who may not be in education, employment or training, particularly those showing signs of fire-setting behaviour. Its aim is to reduce risk-taking and antisocial behaviour by helping participants understand the consequences of their actions and make safer choices.

When appropriate, it routinely shares information with relevant organisations to support the prosecution of arsonists. The service gave us examples where it had supported Cambridgeshire Constabulary with witness statements (among other information) to prosecute prolific arsonists, which led to successful prosecutions.

Protecting the public through fire regulation

Good

Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service is good at protecting the public through fire regulation.

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 services must have a locally determined, risk-based intervention 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 has a clear protection strategy

The service's protection strategy is clearly linked to the risks identified in its community risk management plan.

Leaders responsible for protection have clearly communicated the strategy and protection aims to the workforce. As a result, protection staff understand how they contribute to the protection aims of the service individually and as a team.

Staff across the service are involved in this activity and effectively share information as needed. For example, the service has completed fire safety audits across all residential high-rise premises and shares the relevant evacuation strategies with other departments. Wholetime firefighters carry out business engagement visits in lower and medium-risk premises (non-sleeping risk) such as warehouses and shops, to provide fire safety advice and identify potential hazards and risks.

The service then uses information to adjust planning assumptions and direct activity between its prevention, protection and response functions. This means it properly aligns its resources with risk. When the protection team identifies changes that affect how buildings and people should be protected in the event of a fire, it shares this risk-critical information with firefighters. This helps the service keep firefighters and the community safe, and provide an effective and well-informed emergency response.

The service remains on track to inspect all premises identified in the risk-based intervention programme

The service's risk-based intervention programme is focused on its highest-risk buildings. At the time of our inspection, the service told us it was on track to hit its target of 533 high-risk audits within the 2-year rolling timescale it had set itself.

When we reviewed the service's audits of high-risk buildings, we found it had completed them in the times frames it had set itself. And in most cases, the responsible person received the outcome letter within a few days.

The service has enough qualified protection staff to meet the requirements of its risk-based intervention programme. In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service employed 19 competent protection staff. This helps it provide the range of audit and enforcement activity needed both now and in the future.

Protection staff receive comprehensive training to make sure they can carry out their roles to a high standard. Staff get the right training and work to appropriate accreditation. The service has invested in staff development, with several employees completing advanced fire safety qualifications, including fire engineering. The protection staff that we spoke to were positive about the quality of the training they received and the opportunities available to them. But we heard from some staff that limited succession planning across the service was contributing to increased workload issues.

The service supports the Building Safety Regulator well

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 told us that, due to its proactive planning, the 33 identified tall buildings were already part of its risk-based intervention programme. Therefore, the legislation hasn't led to an increase in the time the service spends assuring the safety of tall buildings. It expects this demand to rise with the increased pace of remediation work that is underway to replace flammable cladding.

The service is supporting the Building Safety Regulator. It has allocated staff time to carry out training and works on regulating higher-risk buildings. The service has established joint arrangements with the local authorities. A designated lead is responsible for overseeing all tall buildings within the service area and offering guidance and advice as required.

It expects these arrangements to have manageable impact on its other protection activity. However, the service has identified a further 250 medium-rise buildings that must be audited by 2031, which is likely to place additional pressure on staff resources. It has established a 'tall building group', which meets every two months to review relevant policies and procedures. The group is also responsible for assessing any new premises that may require an audit.

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

We found the service continued to have good arrangements in place to receive this information. When it doesn't receive the right information, it takes action. And it updates the risk information it gives to its operational staff.

The audits reviewed were completed to a high standard

We reviewed a range of audits that the service had carried out at different buildings across its area. These included audits carried out:

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

In our review, we found the service had completed the audits to a high standard, in a consistent, systematic way and in line with its policies. The service makes relevant information from its audits available to operational teams and control room operators. For example, after completing a fire safety audit, the protection team contacted the local fire station to encourage it to carry out a familiarisation visit based on the issues found.

We found that a building used as an energy storage unit had suffered a significant fire, leaving it uninhabitable. As the service was unable to visit that specific site, staff instead inspected similar premises owned by the same company to assess fire safety compliance. This demonstrates the service making effective use of its resources.

We also spoke to fire control operators who had access to evacuation information for high-rise residential buildings.

The service has a clear quality assurance process in place

The service carries out proportionate quality assurance of its protection activity. It completes a practical quality assurance assessment annually. We were shown examples of this process and how feedback was given to the inspector. The service would benefit from sharing any learning with the wider protection team, as this would support continuous development across the department.

The service's wholetime firefighters carry out business engagement visits. Although some firefighters hold formal fire safety qualifications, several told us they hadn't received any training since the process was introduced. Some said they would welcome further training on how to complete these visits, and most reported they hadn't been involved in any form of quality assurance. We also found that the premises assigned for visits weren't prioritised based on risk.

The service has good evaluation tools in place to measure how effective its activity is and make sure all sections of its communities get appropriate access to the protection services that meet their needs. For example, the service monitors how many business engagement visits carried out by firefighters result in a referral to the specialist protection department, as well as how many lead to a formal fire safety audit. It also maintains a central register to record all formal notices. This makes sure it has effective oversight and provides regular updates on premises and the engagement activity that has taken place.

The service uses most of its enforcement powers where necessary

The service uses most of its range of enforcement powers and, when appropriate, it prosecutes those who don't comply with fire safety regulations. In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service carried out 104 audits which were deemed unsatisfactory and 106 enforcement activities following on from this. These included 100 informal notifications, 2 enforcement notices and 4 prohibition notices.

This shows proportionate enforcement activity compared to the number of unsatisfactory audits. It only completed one prosecution in the past five years. The service should share the findings from the recent prosecution, as the staff we spoke to had limited understanding of the case and any learning outcomes arising from it.

The service hasn't served any alteration notices since at least 2019. The service should consider the use of alteration notices, as some prohibition notices in force at the time of our inspection were served several years previously. Alteration notices put the onus on the responsible person at a property to notify the service if they intend to make changes that could affect fire safety.

In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service set a target of 247 high-risk premises audits and completed 234. This demonstrates that the service is effectively focusing on high-risk premises to reduce risk within the area.

However, during the same period, 87.9 percent of fire safety audits resulted in satisfactory outcomes, which is high. This is consistent with the previous five years. The service is inspecting the correct premises, and inspectors are trained effectively. But it should make sure that the outcomes of audits (whether formal or informal) are always proportionate to the findings. From the small sample of files we reviewed, one file showed that the service could potentially have taken enforcement action but didn't. While we acknowledge that the service prefers working with responsible persons to address any fire safety issues, it should assure itself that it uses enforcement powers appropriately and consistently when necessary.

The service is able to respond to enforcement issues 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

The service works well with others

The service works closely with other enforcement agencies to regulate fire safety, and it routinely exchanges risk information with them. Staff told us that they worked closely with a range of local authorities. For example, after fire safety concerns were identified at a property housing refugees, they carried out a joint visit with Peterborough City Council and Cambridgeshire Constabulary. The service collaborated effectively with its partner organisations, and additional visits were scheduled to make sure all fire safety issues were addressed.

The service allocates a dedicated protection officer to every event in the county. The officer works closely with partner agencies to make sure that fire safety regulations are met and that adequate information is available to support responding firefighters in the event of an emergency. For example, we reviewed the arrangements for a large horse show that attracts several thousand people. The service shared the resulting safety information across its prevention, protection and response teams to support effective planning and co-ordination.

The service responds well to building and licensing consultations

In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service responded to 99 percent of building consultations (660 of 667) and 98.4 percent of licensing consultations (442 of 449) within the required time frame. This means it consistently meets its statutory responsibility to comment on fire safety arrangements at new and altered buildings within the prescribed timescales. There are performance targets in place to monitor this.

The service works well with businesses

The service proactively works with local businesses and other organisations to promote compliance with fire safety legislation. It provides quarterly fire safety seminars to businesses and responsible persons, helping them understand their duties under the relevant fire safety legislation. These sessions continue to be well attended.

The service told us that it attended the National Farmers' Union's annual health and safety event, attended by more than 200 farmers, to speak about fire safety seminars, risk assessments and rural firefighting.

In addition, the service provides detailed fire safety guidance for businesses on its website. There is an interactive section on the website and the protection team created a series of videos highlighting fire safety. The service also manages primary authority partnerships, offering assured advice to help businesses achieve and maintain compliance with fire safety legislation.

Responding to fires and other emergencies

Requires improvement

Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement 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 it gathers and records relevant and up-to-date risk information to help protect firefighters, the public and property during an emergency.

The service should assure itself it has procedures in place to record important operational decisions made at incidents, and that staff understand these procedures well.

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

The service should make sure it understands how to adopt national operational guidance, including joint and national learning, and put in place a plan to implement this.

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 response strategy is linked to the community risk management plan

The service has linked its response strategy to the risks identified in its community risk management plan (CRMP).

Leaders responsible for response have clearly communicated the strategy and main response aims to the workforce. As a result, response staff understand how they contribute to the response aims of the service individually and as a team.

The service locates its fire engines and response staff, and designs its working patterns, to help it respond flexibly to fires and other emergencies with the appropriate resources. The service has bought two new 4x4 off-road firefighting vehicles to increase its flexible resource. It has also introduced its vision 2030 programme. This programme has two main aims:

- to use data and scenario planning to understand what fire engines and equipment it needs and the best locations for these; and
- to understand how the service crews fire engines so it can make sure it has the firefighters available to meet its response needs.

It plans to explore barriers to availability and the different crewing and contractual processes in place.

The programme also focuses on making sure that the service aligns resources more closely with the risks across the community. The plan is to introduce modelling software that will allow the service to identify requirements based on changing risks and to improve productivity and efficiency in the use of operational staff.

The service also plans to review its response standard within the CRMP to make sure all incidents are responded to based on risk. This includes how it assigns resources to incident types and the speed at which it responds.

The service meets its response standards

The service has set out response standards in its CRMP and consistently meets these standards. It aims to have its first fire engine at the most serious incidents within an average of 9 minutes in urban areas and 12 minutes in rural areas. It also aims to get its first fire engine to all incidents within 18 minutes on 95 percent of occasions. In the year ending 31 March 2025, it achieved the first fire engine attending in 7 minutes and 19 seconds in urban areas and 11 minutes and 21 seconds in rural areas. Almost all incidents (95.6 percent) in the service area were attended by the first fire engine within 18 minutes.

There are no national response standards, but the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) does publish data on response times to primary and secondary fires. However, locally set standards may be calculated differently to the data the MHCLG produces.

MHCLG data shows that in the year ending 30 June 2025, the service's average response time to primary fires was 10 minutes and 46 seconds. This is faster than the average for services that are predominantly rural. The average for this group was 11 minutes and 7 seconds.

Using this measure, the service's average response time has increased from 10 minutes and 28 seconds in the year to 30 June 2024. This increase is predominantly due to an increase in call handling time, which has increased from 1 minute and 3 seconds to 1 minute and 16 seconds during the same period.

Despite some progress, the availability of on-call fire engines needs to improve

To support its response strategy, the service told us that it aimed to have a minimum of 14 fire engines available across the county at any one time. This target is based on the need to respond to two simultaneous incidents, each requiring six fire engines, while keeping two additional engines free to provide resilience. In addition, as at 31 March 2025, the service had a target of 100 percent availability for 20 of its fire engines. However, the service doesn't always achieve either the standard or targets it has set.

In the year ending 31 March 2025, availability of wholetime fire engines was 99.7 percent, which represents a slight decrease from the previous year's 100 percent. During the same period, availability of on-call fire engines was 56.8 percent, which is an increase from the previous year when availability was 56.2 percent.

Since our last inspection, the service has introduced 'crews of three', where on-call staff respond to all incidents when only three firefighters are available. The service consulted with its staff and the public, and completed risk assessments to support this approach. It has evaluated the crews of three and demonstrated to us how frequently it has used these. While this isn't intended as a long-term solution, it aims to increase the availability of on-call fire engines.

The service explained that any crew of three on-call firefighters would always be supported by an additional fire engine. It told us that a three-person crew could deal with a wide range of incident types. However, in the less common situation where someone was trapped inside a burning building, firefighters would only enter the building when at least four crew members were present. Until the supporting crew arrived, the initial team of three could establish the water supply, set out the necessary equipment and begin tackling the fire from the outside.

We were told by a few on-call firefighters that the initiative helped them gain experience through more frequent callouts. However, although risk assessments were already in place, firefighters reported experiencing moral pressure when they arrived at a house fire where someone may be trapped but they were unable to enter until a second fire engine arrived. To address this, the service should strengthen the training and guidance provided to on-call firefighters. This will help them fully understand their roles and responsibilities and safe operating procedures when attending incidents with a crew of only three on-call firefighters.

Despite some progress, the service needs to do more to improve the availability of its on-call fire engines.

The service should improve the way it identifies, gathers and maintains risk information

We sampled a range of risk information, including the information in place for firefighters responding to incidents at high-risk, high-rise buildings and the information held by fire control.

The service collects some information about the highest-risk people, places and threats it has identified. But some of the information we reviewed was limited, inaccurate or out of date. For example, one high-risk premises sampled didn't have basement floor plans available on the mobile data terminal, and another high-rise residential building had incorrect details recorded. Not all buildings identified as risks had suitable records in place. As a result, the service isn't always able to effectively identify, reduce or mitigate risk. Staff also reported that they couldn't always access or interpret the information easily.

We found that most staff hadn't received training on how to carry out a risk information visit, despite this being available. We also found that the quality assurance processes were inconsistent. In addition, the service had been experiencing system issues that resulted in risk information levels being incorrectly downgraded; however, this was resolved at the time of our inspection. We found tasks outstanding from 2019 and 2020 due to user recording errors or risk information records being allocated to the wrong team. We identified that the systems supporting the management of risk information remained heavily reliant on manual processes and lacked resilience.

The service has a formalised process to exchange risk information with others when necessary. For example, we were told that response staff were alerted to hoarding risks, which is where a person has collected so many belongings in their house that it poses a fire risk. But many staff are unclear about whose responsibility it is to make sure vulnerability information is kept up to date and accurate. The service doesn't have clear management arrangements for this. The service should introduce an effective system to make sure it reviews its vulnerability information when required and that this is kept up to date.

The service needs to do better at making sure its risk information about people, places and threats is accurate and up to date. Therefore, this is an area for improvement.

On-call firefighters are now familiar with risks in their areas

In our last inspection, we highlighted an area for improvement that the service should make sure on-call staff were familiar with the risks in their local areas and had an understanding of fires in tall buildings, so they were better prepared to fight fires and carry out rescues safely. We are pleased with the progress the service has made and have closed this area for improvement.

The service requires on-call firefighters to complete a minimum of two risk visits to high-risk buildings each year. These may form part of a familiarisation activity or a training exercise. This is reported on a performance dashboard. We were shown an e-learning package to support understanding of fires in tall buildings, and some on-call firefighters told us they had also received face-to-face training. We spoke with on-call firefighters, who told us they now felt familiar with the risks present in their local areas and had a better understanding of how fires behave in tall buildings.

The service needs to improve its procedures to record important operational decisions made at incidents

The service has incident commanders who are trained and regularly and properly assessed. As at 31 March 2025, the service had the required number of incident commanders with the appropriate accreditation. However, three level 1 incident commanders were no longer accredited but were still carrying out operational duties.

Incident commanders are formally assessed every two years and carry out regular continuing professional development between assessments. This helps the service to effectively manage the whole range of incidents it could face, from those that are small and routine to major and multi-agency incidents.

As part of our inspection, we interviewed incident commanders from across the service. Not all of them could explain how they completed risk assessments, made decisions or recorded information at incidents in line with national best practice.

We found that risk assessments weren’t routinely completed during incidents. Several of the files we reviewed showed limited evidence that risk assessments had been carried out, including a major incident. The lack of formal records reduces transparency and weakens assurance. Completing risk assessments at the incident ground is essential to make sure the service can command and deploy fire service resources safely and effectively. They also have a critical role in protecting both firefighters and the public. This is an area for improvement.

Although operational debriefs occur, some learning is being missed

As part of our inspection, we reviewed a range of emergency incidents and training events. These included incidents in domestic and commercial premises, and a large multi-agency incident. The service doesn't always act on learning from incidents, which means it misses opportunities to improve for the public.

We identified some positive practices. We found that the service carried out debriefs in a timely manner, and included participation from relevant emergency partner organisations. These debriefs were facilitated by an independent practitioner.

We recognise that the service is introducing a new automated system to strengthen the debrief process and make sure actions are allocated and tracked. However, we found that actions arising from debriefs weren't routinely followed up, and there was limited strategic oversight of the process. For example, one debrief we reviewed didn't specify who the person responsible was for any of the recommended actions and provided minimal information on how these had been completed. The service wasn't consistently tracking recommendations from structured debriefs to make sure they were implemented to an appropriate standard.

We also found that opportunities were being missed to identify wider themes and use them to inform training and improve future practice. For instance, one file we reviewed showed that incident commanders weren't routinely completing risk assessments during incidents, as required, yet this didn't appear in the learning points. Additionally, we found no evidence that on-call firefighters who had been involved in the incident participated in any debriefs.

The service acknowledged that this meant it was losing valuable learning. This is an area for improvement.

The service is continuing to integrate fire control in most activities

We were pleased to find that the service's fire control staff were integrated into its command, training, exercise, debrief and assurance activity. Some fire control staff told us that they attended debriefs and had an opportunity to feed into the debrief process. Fire control staff also take part in debriefs in any incidents that involve six fire engines or more.

Since our last inspection, the service has transitioned to a new mobilising system. Despite some early issues, most staff told us the system was now operating effectively. The service has a dedicated officer who continually updates and improves the mobilising system, along with its data, processes and procedures. During our inspection, we observed a live emergency call in which resources were deployed efficiently and appropriately.

The service previously operated a combined fire control room in partnership with Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service. All emergency calls for both Suffolk and Cambridgeshire were answered by control operators based at Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service headquarters. Fire control operators could mobilise fire engines and resources for both services. However, in the months leading up to our inspection, Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service had withdrawn from the collaboration and established its own fire control function. This change has created a level of unease among Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service's fire control staff. The service continues to be open to future collaboration opportunities, to mitigate the impacts of Suffolk's withdrawal.

The service has been slow to implement national operational guidance

We were disappointed to find that not all the service's policies were in line with national operational guidance. Although the service has prioritised the highest-risk areas, many actions remain outstanding. The service has invested in dedicated staff to support the implementation of national operational guidance across its policies, procedures and training. However, progress has been slow, reportedly due to competing priorities and limited staff capacity. We found some evidence that the service had improved strategic oversight in this area, but it needs to continue monitoring. This is an area for improvement.

Responding to major and multi-agency incidents

Adequate

Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service is adequate at responding to major and multi-agency incidents.

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).

Area for improvement

The service should make sure it is well prepared to form part of a multi-agency response to a terrorist incident, and that all staff understand its procedures for responding.

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 good planning arrangements for major and multi-agency incidents

The service has effectively anticipated and considered the reasonably foreseeable risks and threats it may face. It has listed these in both local and national risk registers as part of its community risk management planning. At the time the community risk management plan was published in 2024, the service reported that its ten busiest days on record had all occurred within the previous five years, each caused by weather-related incidents such as extreme heat or widespread flooding.

It is also familiar with the significant risks that neighbouring fire and rescue services may face, which it might reasonably be asked to respond to in an emergency. These include emerging challenges associated with the proposed Universal Studios theme park in Bedfordshire. This will lead to increased road traffic and a higher potential for road traffic collisions.

Firefighters have access to risk information from most neighbouring services and the service has established risk-sharing agreements to support this. These agreements make sure that firefighters can access risk information for locations within 10 km of county borders, enhancing cross-border operational readiness and the effectiveness of joint emergency responses.

The service needs to do more to help operational staff understand their roles in a marauding terrorist attack

During this inspection, we considered how well prepared the service was to respond to foreseeable major incidents including a severe weather event and a potential marauding terrorist attack (MTA).

We recognise that the service doesn't provide a specialist MTA capability. Instead, a specialist team would be mobilised from a neighbouring fire and rescue service. The service continues to have specialist, national, inter-agency liaison officers who provide cover at all times to support its MTA response.

However, many firefighters and supervisory managers told us they didn't know what their role would be during this kind of incident. We were disappointed to find that the service's policies and procedures were unclear. We found that policies and procedures were stored in multiple locations and some training material had online links that didn't work. We spoke to some firefighters who hadn't received any training to understand their role in an MTA. This is an area for improvement.

The service is working with other emergency responders to make local communities more resilient. In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service completed ten multi-agency training exercises. The rate of multi-agency training exercises completed was 24.2 per 1,000 full-time equivalent firefighters, which is lower than the England rate of 54.5. During the same period, it completed 13 national resilience training exercises. The rate of national resilience training exercises completed was 31.4 per 1,000 full-time equivalent firefighters, which is higher than the England rate of 23.6. In our workforce survey, 81 percent of respondents (156 of 192) agreed that the service effectively carried out joint training or exercises with other agencies. The service is implementing a new system that records all exercises in a single central location.

We reviewed the service's response to a major incident involving multiple stabbings on a moving train approaching a railway station. We found that paramedics had already treated several casualties and the service's resources were subsequently reassigned to a multi-agency search operation alongside armed police officers and East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust. The incident then moved from an active response into the recovery phase.

At the time of our inspection, the service had completed its initial structured debrief, which internal staff attended. The debrief was thorough and resulted in 25 recommendations. It also highlighted some positive actions. For example, while operational crews awaited deployment, they carried out a pre-brief and made sure all necessary equipment was ready. They also increased the number of thermal imaging cameras available to support search and rescue operations. Leaders across the organisation should make sure that all recommendations are fully implemented.

The service works well with other fire and rescue services

The service supports other fire and rescue services when they are responding to emergency incidents. For example, we found that the service supported Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service (among others) during a major incident involving a car park fire at London Luton Airport. It continues to share a principal officer rota with Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service. It is intraoperable with these services and can form part of a multi-agency response.

It maintains and staffs a high-volume pump that is also available to the national resilience programme. This can support a large-scale flooding incident and can be deployed to assist those in need.

Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles could be further strengthened

The incident commanders we interviewed had been trained in and were familiar with Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles (JESIP).

In one major incident we reviewed, we found that the service took proactive steps to support other agencies in the application of JESIP principles. It successfully asked for clearer structures and defined outcomes in subsequent JESIP meetings, which strengthened the overall multi-agency response.

We reviewed the debrief following the major incident and were pleased to find that the service had identified the challenges it faced in applying JESIP. It has plans in place to improve understanding of JESIP principles.

The service takes part in cross-border exercises

The service has a cross-border exercise plan with neighbouring fire and rescue services. This helps them work together effectively to keep the public safe. The plan includes the risks of foreseeable major incidents where the service could be required to give support or ask for help from neighbouring services. We were pleased to find that the service used learning from these exercises to inform risk information and service plans.

The service told us about an exercise in a tall building that focused on the rapid spread of fire, evacuation complexities and communication difficulties. We were pleased to hear that the exercise involved other fire and rescue services, Cambridgeshire Constabulary and East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust. In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service completed eight training exercises with neighbouring fire and rescue services. The rate of training exercises completed with neighbouring fire and rescue services was 19.4 per 1,000 full-time equivalent firefighters, which is lower than the England rate of 24.5.

The service is an effective partner in the local resilience forum

The service has good arrangements in place to respond to emergencies with the agencies that make up the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Local Resilience Forum (CPLRF). These arrangements include developing contingency plans to deal with larger risk sites covered by the Control of Major Accident Hazards Regulations 2015.

The service is a valued member of the local resilience forum and chairs the tactical business group. It is represented in the strategic and tactical co-ordinating groups and subgroups of the CPLRF. The service told us that it contributed to more than ten subgroups, with managers participating at all levels of the CPLRF. This makes sure that all statutory duties are fulfilled and supports the ongoing development of the CPLRF, enhancing both its effectiveness and efficiency. The service takes part in regular training events with other members of the forum and uses the learning to develop planning assumptions about responding to major and multi-agency incidents. For example, the CPLRF co-ordinated a multi-agency exercise at an airport to test joint emergency response procedures. Senior leaders should continue to make sure that the service is a vital partner in the CPLRF as this, ultimately, provides a better service to the public.

The service makes use of national learning

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 and ambulance services. It uses this learning to inform the planning assumptions it makes with other organisations. National operational learning and joint organisational learning are shared through a single point of contact in the service and managed through its operational assurance team.

While there is an electronic process for handling multiple fire survival guidance calls, the service should enhance staff awareness through further training

In our last inspection, we focused on how well prepared the service was to respond to a major incident at a tall building, such as the tragedy at Grenfell Tower. At this type of incident, a fire and rescue service would receive a high volume of simultaneous fire calls. We highlighted as an area for improvement that the service should make sure it had an effective method to share fire survival guidance information with multiple callers and that it had a dedicated communication link in place.

In our latest inspection, we found that the service had developed and introduced its own electronic method of sharing fire survival guidance and therefore we have closed this area for improvement. We found that the system in place was robust enough to receive and manage the likely volume of calls. Staff in the emergency control room, at the incident and in assisting control rooms can share, view and update the actions that result from individual calls.

Although the service had provided training for staff who directly used the electronic system, most firefighters we spoke to had limited or no awareness of how the system worked or how the information was tracked. We also found that supporting equipment intended for tall building fires, such as evacuation boards, wasn't present on the fire engines. While we have closed this area for improvement, the service should make sure that all operational staff are aware of and understand the electronic system for sharing fire survival guidance.

Making best use of resources to provide an efficient and affordable service

Adequate

Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service is adequate at making the best use of its resources to manage risk and to make sure it is efficient and affordable.

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.

Services should continuously look for ways to improve their effectiveness and efficiency. This includes transforming how they work and improving their value for money. They 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 should assure itself that its IT applications are resilient, reliable, accurate and accessible.

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

Main findings

There is a clear internal structure in place but some performance information isn't reaching senior leaders

The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Fire and Rescue Authority oversees the service. Its governance role includes setting the strategic direction of the service and providing scrutiny to monitor the service's performance and make sure its strategic aims are achieved.

The service has clear strategic oversight arrangements in place to manage financial and resourcing risks, performance, and improvement plans. It has processes, controls and internal governance arrangements in place to manage strategic risks. We saw evidence that the service worked effectively with members of the fire and rescue authority and there were multiple governance meetings in place to provide assurance. At the time of our inspection, the service was developing proposals to strengthen its governance arrangements to improve accountability and provide more effective decision-making.

The service reports accurate and suitably detailed financial and risk information to the fire and rescue authority. Service leaders communicate well with members, and there are workshops to give additional context ahead of meetings. For example, as part of the vision 2030 work, the service held seminars prior to the fire and rescue authority meeting to help members better understand the programme. We found that the members were committed and provided scrutiny and challenge to the service.

The service's senior leaders provide members with quarterly performance reports. These include information such as:

- data showing whether response standards have been met;
- details about deaths and injuries from fire;
- the number of home fire safety visits against each target group; and
- performance against its risk-based intervention programme.

However, we found that the service needed to improve how it incorporated our inspection findings into these reports. At the time of our inspection, important areas, such as the completion of fitness testing, medicals and making sure that risk information records were kept up to date, weren't included and this information wasn't reaching senior leaders. The chief fire officer and fire authority chair meet at least every two weeks to discuss performance. Adding this information would strengthen transparency and allow the fire and rescue authority, along with senior leaders, to be fully accountable for performance.

The scheme of delegation clearly sets out responsibilities for the service's senior leaders. The chief fire officer holds overall responsibility for the fire service and may delegate duties as required. This ensures continuity of leadership, clear operational command arrangements and strong financial stewardship. Decision-making powers are clearly set out, which supports organisational efficiency while maintaining member oversight where appropriate. The inclusion of urgency powers means decisions can be made swiftly in critical situations, protecting service continuity.

We found that senior leaders didn’t have personal objectives and instead operated with organisational objectives. For example, the chief fire officer doesn’t have individual objectives relating to culture, governance or personal development. By defining individual objectives, accountability becomes clear. Further detail on this issue is provided in the section on ‘Leading people effectively’.

The allocation of resources means the service meets its core activities but this can be improved

The service has allocated sufficient resources across prevention, protection and response, but other areas need more funding.

It consistently meets its response standards, which means that the public will receive a timely response in an emergency. We found that in the year ending 31 March 2025, the service had increased the number of home fire safety visits it carried out by 20.4 percent, compared to the previous year. And at the time of our inspection, the service told us it was on track to hit its target of 533 high-risk audits within the 2-year rolling timescale it had set itself.

The service aims to have a minimum of 14 fire engines available across the county at all times. However, we found that it often fell below this standard. Although the exact number of instances was difficult for the service to quantify over a 12-month period, we were told that in the 13-months prior to the inspection, 6.3 percent of the total available hours fell below the minimum level. The service has a dedicated team to manage dynamic staffing through overtime and standby cover moves to maintain fire engine availability. But the service needs to improve in this area.

At the time of our inspection, we found that, due to absence among fire control operators, supervisory managers frequently had to handle emergency calls. Staff told us that fire control staffing levels occasionally dropped below the minimum required, which made them frustrated as their training sessions were cancelled. Additionally, some staff told us that some departments were under-resourced, and recruitment practices tended to be reactive rather than planned.

While the service’s financial plans are linked to the community risk management plan (CRMP), the service doesn’t have a workforce plan, which should describe how it allocates resources to prevention, protection and response. This would allow it to better match resources to the priorities it has identified in its CRMP.

The service should have a sustainable plan in place to resource its protection function if protection grant funding is reduced or withdrawn. We were told that the service hadn’t incorporated some protection roles into the medium-term financial plan. As a result, at the time of our inspection, these posts were funded through grant income rather than from the base budget. This creates a financial sustainability risk: if the grant funding is reduced or withdrawn, the service could face an immediate shortfall that would directly affect staffing levels and overall capacity within the protection department.

The service should do more to maintain availability of its on-call crews. We identified that some on-call fire stations continued to experience poor availability and fire engines were frequently unavailable. This represents an inefficient use of resources. However, the service's vision 2030 programme aims to better match its resources to risk.

The service has evaluated its mix of crewing and duty systems. It has analysed its response cover and can show it deploys its fire engines and response staff to manage risk efficiently. This will be further improved with the vision 2030 programme. The service has invested in a new resource modelling tool to support this work. For example, senior leaders explained that, due to population and housing growth across the county, response-time targets may not be met in some areas, and so it plans to change its mix of crewing and duty systems. The service told us that as part of the vision 2030 programme, it planned to submit a proposal to the fire authority to consider increasing its operational cover during specific seasons, particularly in the summer when the likelihood of weather-related incidents is higher.

The service continues to be effective at financial planning

In 2025/26, the service's net revenue budget was £40.7 million. The net revenue budget for the previous year has been adjusted for inflation from £38.3 million to £40 million, which means the budget increased by 1.8 percent between 2024/25 and 2025/26 in real terms. The budget was funded by £27.1 million from council tax, £8.8 million from business rates, £4.8 million from revenue support, £1.4 million from other government grants and £980,000 from other income. The service's total funding was £43.1 million, which was £46.18 per head of its population. This is within the typical range compared to all services in England.

The service has a sound understanding of future financial challenges. These include uncertainties around future pay settlements, significant housing and population growth, and the impact of Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service's withdrawal from the combined fire control arrangements. The withdrawal has resulted in a loss of income. The service has plans to mitigate its main financial risks. At the time of our inspection, it was open to exploring potential partnerships with other fire and rescue services in the future to provide a combined fire control function.

Its planning assumptions are relatively robust and realistic. They take account of the wider external environment and some scenario planning for future spending reductions. These include changes in inflation, pay awards and grant income. The service continues to operate a zero-based budgeting approach. During 2024/25, the service was able to take advantage of relatively high interest rates and maximise the potential of its cash by investing in short-term investments. This resulted in the service earning a level of investment interest far above that budgeted.

The service builds its plans on sound scenarios. This helps make sure it is sustainable and underpinned by financial controls that reduce the risk of misusing public money. We found that the procurement arrangements were structured, compliant and supported by clear policies that guided tendering, contract award and working with suppliers. The service benefits from experienced procurement professionals and uses established frameworks to secure value for money. Major contracts receive regular oversight through governance boards, and documentation demonstrates an improving level of commercial discipline. When put to full use, these arrangements help make sure there is transparency, fairness and financial probity across procurement.

The service's capital programme is set at £17.3 million, covering 2025/26 to 2028/29. This includes investment in vehicle replacement, land and building, and IT.

Capital financing costs are 1.3 percent of the net revenue budget. They are set to increase by 2.4 percent by 2027/28 under existing capital plans.

By 2027/28, the service forecasts debt and reserves to be 27.2 percent and 9 percent, respectively, of the net revenue budget. This compares to forecasted levels of 19.5 percent and 10 percent, respectively, for 2025/26. This shows that the service expects its debt level to increase and reserve level to decrease slightly over the period of its medium-term financial plan.

The service has a sensible and sustainable plan for using its reserves. This includes using earmarked reserves for transformation projects and mitigating emerging risks. For example, the business continuity reserve is held to cover unforeseen pressures, such as inflation or pay awards.

The service's performance reports could be strengthened

The service's arrangements for managing performance clearly link resource use to its CRMP and its strategic priorities. It produces performance reports, which are aligned to its CRMP. The performance reports cover a wide range of issues, including prevention, protection, response and people data. However, the service would benefit from strengthening these reports further. For instance, we found that senior leaders didn't have strategic oversight of fitness testing, medicals or risk information records. We also identified limited oversight to make sure that recommendations from operational debriefs or equality impact assessments are completed effectively.

The service uses data to improve staff productivity, make sure resources are used efficiently and effectively and provide value for money. The service understands how it uses its wholetime firefighters. It collects data on how they spend their time across day and night shifts. It makes the most of its capacity. The service has completed a workforce productivity review of its wholetime firefighters, identifying efficiencies and opportunities to further increase productivity. As a result, wholetime crews will be able to provide a greater range of activities and the service has increased its targets for prevention, protection and response work carried out by wholetime firefighters.

To support this, performance dashboards are in place across the service, helping teams to monitor and review relevant information effectively.

The service is taking only limited action to manage its response to unwanted fire signals. In the year ending 30 June 2025, 53.2 percent of incidents attended in Cambridgeshire were fire false alarms. The rate of attendance at incidents that were fire false alarms was 4.9 per 1,000 population. This is higher than the England rate of 4.3.

In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service didn't attend 36.9 percent of automatic fire alarm requests. This is lower than the England average of 44.6 percent. Although the service has call-challenging protocols in place and works with responsible persons and businesses to reduce unnecessary mobilisations, it needs to take further action to improve how it manages and responds to fire false alarms.

The service is taking steps to make sure its workforce is as productive as possible. This includes putting in place new ways of working. The service told us about a weekend on-call trial it had introduced for on-call firefighters. During these shifts, which operated from 10am to 6pm, on-call firefighters carried out prevention activities, maintained their training and remained ready to respond to incidents as needed. While the trial proved successful, it was costly. At the time of our inspection, the service was reviewing whether this would continue.

The service continues to use two day-crewed fire engines and two roaming fire engines to cover on-call areas when the on-call fire engine isn't available. Firefighters on the roaming fire engines carry out prevention and protection activities in the local area of the on-call station they are deployed to.

The service continues to make efficiency savings

In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service's expenditure was £41.4 million, which was £44.32 per head of its population. This is within the typical range compared to all services in England.

There are regular reviews to consider all of the service's expenditure, including its non-pay costs. This scrutiny makes sure the service gets value for money. New managers responsible for budgets are given one-to-one training to make sure they understand how to use financial systems and manage expenditure. And expenditure is scrutinised through departmental budget reviews, strategic leadership meetings and value for money excellence meetings.

In addition, several areas of operational efficiency have generated savings. The service told us that it made:

- £77,000 in savings through reduced fuel use for 2024/25;
- £34,000 in savings by using an internal mental health professional rather than paying for external support;

- £21,000 in savings by avoiding the need for external borrowing in 2024/25; and
- £23,000 in credit from vehicle insurance adjustments.

It consistently achieves the savings identified in its financial and efficiency plans. We were pleased to find that it made £592,000 in savings in 2024/25, greatly exceeding the forecasted savings of £360,000.

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 estate, fleet and procurement. We found that the service had been working on a major project to sell one of its existing fire stations and relocate to a new site. Although the service had provisionally agreed the sale and identified a suitable new location, it ultimately withdrew from the agreement as it didn't offer value for money. This was a bold and responsible decision that we welcome, as it demonstrates scrutiny of public finances to make sure the service provides value for money.

The service monitors and reviews the benefits and results of its contract arrangements, collaborations and improvement projects. It can show that the intended outcomes are consistently achieved. For example, it has a longstanding collaboration with Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service through which the two services share IT support and operate a joint principal officer rota. The service also works with East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust to co-respond across nine fire stations.

The service has community well-being officers, who provide an effective and valued service to the public. This role has been formally evaluated in partnership with East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust.

While the service has outlined all its collaborations, including the associated cost savings and efficiencies, it would benefit from this information being held in a single, centralised location. This would strengthen strategic oversight and make it easier to monitor the impact of its collaborations.

Through its approach to value for money, the service has identified and achieved efficiencies that have also improved its services to the public. For example, its community well-being officers support people who have fallen in their homes. This frees up ambulances and other frontline resources and also allows the service to offer home fire safety advice and provide additional support where needed.

The service now routinely explores opportunities to generate additional income and has a proven track record in securing extra funding. For example, it has successfully obtained investment of more than £700,000 through the Community Infrastructure Levy for the development of a fire station.

The service's estate and fleet strategies have clear links to the CRMP

The service's capital programme and estate and fleet strategies have clear links to its CRMP. All response vehicles are now plug-in hybrid models as part of the service's hybrid rollout. Both the estate and fleet strategies exploit opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness. For example, through collaboration with a local authority, the service has trialled hydrotreated vegetable oil, a renewable and sustainable paraffinic diesel alternative produced from waste fats and vegetable oils. This fuel significantly reduces emissions compared with conventional diesel.

The service maximises opportunities across its estates, including the rollout of electric vehicle chargers. It is committed to becoming carbon neutral by 2030 and has already achieved carbon-neutral status at one of its fire stations by installing heat pumps and solar panels. It generates income by charging partner organisations to use its premises. Following a comprehensive review of its fleet, the service has invested in new vehicles.

The service regularly reviews these strategies so that it can properly assess the effect that any changes in estate and fleet provision, or future innovation, have on risk.

It consistently carries out estate and fleet projects on time and within budget and manages risks appropriately. For example, the service has refurbished 12 on-call and four wholetime fire stations. There are 11 new drill ground towers, which support firefighter training.

The service needs to make sure its IT applications are resilient, reliable, accurate and accessible

The service sometimes considers how changes in technology and future innovation may affect risk. We found that it had introduced some new IT applications since our last inspection, such as a cloud-based finance system that had achieved financial and time savings. The system reduces the need for printing, replaces multiple spreadsheets with centralised digital records and is more accessible for budget managers. The service plans to use artificial intelligence.

However, we found that several of the service's IT applications are inefficient, ineffective or no longer fit for purpose. Some applications operate in isolation, and several teams rely on manual spreadsheets. This limits the service's ability to share information effectively and means staff can't always access the data they need to carry out their roles.

During our inspection we identified specific issues with the following IT applications or automated processes:

- fitness testing alerts;
- collection and recording of risk information;
- on-call recruitment process;

- health and safety; and
- asset management database.

We also found paper-based systems across prevention, protection and response. Although the service has begun a programme to modernise its IT, further improvements are required. As a result, this is an area for improvement.

The service manages projects well

The service has put in place the capacity and capability it needs to achieve sustainable change. It has achieved several aims set out in its CRMP. These include developing new fire stations and introducing a wider range of fire engines, giving crews more tactical options when responding to incidents.

The service manages change through effective projects and programmes. It has a clear internal structure with appropriate governance arrangements to make sure progress against projects and programmes is monitored, scrutinised and challenged. For example, the chair of the fire authority sits on the programme management board. This provides an additional layer of oversight and accountability to make sure projects are carried through as intended.

The service uses staff from within the organisation who have the appropriate skills, knowledge and understanding to achieve these changes. The service has sufficient resources to achieve the changes without affecting business-as-usual arrangements. For example, the vision 2030 programme is appropriately staffed and resourced to develop and progress this work.

In our workforce survey, 81 percent of respondents (258 of 320) agreed that senior leaders kept them informed about matters that affected them. And 77 percent of respondents (246 of 320) agreed senior leaders managed change well.

The service can consistently monitor and review the benefits and results of its projects and demonstrate whether the intended outcomes have been achieved.

Promoting, embedding and improving values and culture

Adequate

Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service is adequate at promoting, embedding and improving values and culture.

Fire and rescue services should have positive and inclusive cultures, which are maintained and improved through feedback from staff, scrutiny by leaders and oversight by the fire and rescue authority. Workforce well-being, both physical and mental, should be a priority, and unacceptable behaviour should always be challenged and managed appropriately.

Areas for improvement

The service should proactively monitor working hours to make sure staff (including those on dual and secondary contracts) don't work excessive hours.

The service should make sure that it has appropriate strategic oversight arrangements in place for fitness tests and medicals and that operational staff complete them in line with policy.

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 values are well defined and continue to be understood by staff

The service continues to have well-defined values, which staff understand. During our inspection, all staff we spoke to were welcoming and engaging. We found that staff at all levels of the service showed behaviours that reflected service values. Although the service hasn't implemented the Core Code of Ethics, it has its own values which are: welcoming, respectful and professional. We found that staff understood these and they were integrated within policies and procedures.

Senior leaders demonstrate strong communication across the service with regular face-to-face briefings and scheduled visits to workplaces. We found that the communications team actively monitored and evaluated staff communications, making improvements where needed.

We were pleased to find that the service was providing face-to-face workshops on values and inclusion, which were mandatory for all staff. It planned to introduce an e-learning version of this training.

We heard from some staff that they felt senior leaders were thoughtful, considerate and approachable. Results from our workforce survey support this: 94 percent of respondents (300 of 320) agreed that their colleagues modelled and maintained the service's values, and 85 percent of respondents (272 of 320) agreed that senior leaders modelled and maintained the service's values. While these figures are encouraging, we spoke to a few staff who felt that not all leaders at all levels demonstrated the values of the organisation. We provide further details on this in the section on 'Leading people effectively'.

The service carries out appropriate background checks

The service continues to be compliant with safeguarding legislation by completing appropriate background checks for all existing members of staff. It has clear processes in place and is progressing with its three-year rollout programme. We found the service had appropriate risk assessments in place for any adverse findings and escalated these where necessary. But the service should update its policies for background checks as some don't make it clear which roles require a check.

In the year ending 31 March 2025, 99.5 percent of existing employees who needed a background check had one.

The service is also reducing the risk of abuse, harm and neglect for both the public and staff by completing background checks on new recruits and, if appropriate, existing staff who are applying for new roles. In the year ending 31 March 2025, 100 percent of new recruits who needed a background check had one.

The professional standards board provides greater oversight and scrutiny

The service has robust systems in place to take feedback from a range of activity, scrutinise it and understand the impact on staff and the public. Activity includes public complaints, staff grievances and disciplinary action. We found good examples of the service adjusting policies and procedures as a direct result of the scrutiny that had taken place.

The service has a professional standards board. It oversees the investigation of concerns raised (including grievances, disciplinaries, complaints and whistleblowing concerns) in order to learn lessons and implement organisational change where required. It also oversees complex cases and suspensions and makes sure cases are investigated and treated in a fair and consistent way. The board meets every six weeks and includes the deputy chief fire officer, head of people and the legal and monitoring officer.

The fire and rescue authority receives regular, meaningful updates about people-related issues. This helps it to hold the chief fire officer to account, set priorities for the service, reduce risk for the public and protect the health and safety of staff. Where appropriate, the professional standards board communicates this information to the fire authority chair.

Feedback is routinely requested, but it isn't always acted on

The service has effective arrangements in place to communicate with staff and representative bodies, such as trade unions, and to take account of their legitimate concerns. It has a range of formal and informal arrangements. Senior leaders meet trade unions at least bimonthly.

The service has processes in place to gather feedback and respond to staff concerns. In our workforce survey, 78 percent of respondents (248 of 320) agreed that they felt confident in the processes for providing feedback to all levels of leadership. The service completes staff surveys and we heard how the service had improved its welfare provision in response to feedback from staff.

However, although staff felt the service actively asked for feedback, many staff told us they felt that their feedback wasn't acted on or it was ignored. In our workforce survey, 67 percent of respondents (214 of 320) agreed that they were confident that their feedback would be acted on. Some staff told us that leaders carried out engagement exercises to demonstrate that consultations had taken place, but little was done with the feedback provided.

Individual members of staff and staff network groups we spoke to gave some examples of where they had raised legitimate concerns with leaders. The service had been active in resolving them. However, not all representative bodies had the same experience.

Most staff felt that they could challenge unacceptable behaviour

There is a positive working culture in most places in the service, and most staff feel empowered and willing to challenge unacceptable behaviours when they come across them. In our workforce survey, encouragingly, 84 percent of respondents (270 of 320) agreed that they felt safe to challenge unacceptable behaviour in their service.

Staff have a good understanding of what bullying, harassment and discrimination are, and their negative effects on colleagues and the culture of the organisation. At the time of our inspection, the service was in the process of implementing its revised anti-bullying and harassment policy, which will give staff clearer guidance.

In our workforce survey, 8 percent of respondents (24 of 320) told us that they had felt bullied or harassed by members of their service in the past 12 months. And 8 percent (24 of 320) told us that they had felt discriminated against by members of their service during the same period.

We were pleased to find that the discipline and grievance cases we reviewed were all progressed in a timely manner. We asked the service to tell us about grievances that were related to conduct matters only (and not to include, for example, those against organisational policy).

As at 31 March 2025, there were no live grievances and 34 disciplinary cases. Of these disciplinary cases, seven were gross misconduct cases.

The service follows the policies and procedures that it has in place. The cases we reviewed were managed by the right people at each step of the process. This led to well-justified decisions with clear reasons.

The service offers good support to staff who are the subject of disciplinary action as well as those who raise concerns or grievances or who are victims of bullying or harassment. The staff we talked to had confidence that if they raised a misconduct concern with their line manager, it would be dealt with in an appropriate and confidential manner. Managers have the confidence and training to deal with grievance and discipline issues and feel able to do so.

To further increase transparency, the service should consider publishing information arising from grievances and disciplinaries to its workforce.

The new trauma welfare support process provides effective support

The service continues to have effective and well-understood health and safety policies and procedures in place. A range of well-being provision is available to support both physical and mental health. For example, the service has:

- trauma welfare support practitioners, who are trained to help people who have experienced a traumatic (or potentially traumatic) event;
- access to an external workplace counselling service; and
- mental health awareness campaigns.

These policies and procedures are readily available, and leaders at all levels promote them effectively to all staff. The service has a clear well-being hub on its intranet which provides further information and support about well-being.

In our workforce survey, 98 percent of respondents (315 of 320) agreed that they knew how to access support for their mental health through their service.

The service has introduced a new trauma welfare support process to give staff a proactive and structured approach to managing psychological trauma. The initiative recognises that the nature of incidents, particularly those attended by operational crews, can have significant emotional and psychological impacts. Trauma welfare support is designed to identify, support and manage these impacts early, to make sure staff across the service receive the right care at the right time. The aim is to strengthen individual well-being, promote resilience and create a safer and more supportive working environment. The service carried out an evaluation six months after implementation, which indicated several benefits. There was good take-up from staff, the system was more flexible to individual needs, staff retention had improved and there were some early indications of a reduction in workdays lost due to post-traumatic stress disorder.

The service is proactive in building resilience among staff, and we found examples of where it had intervened to support an individual's needs. There are good provisions in place to promote staff well-being. The service ran a Men's Health event that covered a range of important topics. Staff also shared personal accounts of their own experiences with cancer, which added a powerful and meaningful perspective to the discussions. The feedback from attendees was overwhelmingly positive.

In our workforce survey, encouragingly, 86 percent of respondents (275 of 320) agreed that leaders across the service treated well-being as a priority. Staff reported that they understood and had confidence in the well-being support processes available.

Senior leaders need to strengthen their oversight of health and safety across the service

As at 31 March 2025, 15.4 percent of wholetime firefighters had registered a dual contract within their service and 4.7 percent had a dual contract with another fire and rescue service. The service doesn't have effective policies around dual contracts and secondary employment in place. Nor does it monitor staff who have dual contracts or secondary employment to make sure they don't work excessive hours.

There is no designated responsibility to monitor the number of hours staff work. For example, we heard that staff on dual contracts didn't always adhere to rest periods before and after wholetime shifts. We found many cases where staff were working excessive hours and weren't properly monitored. Managers didn't know their responsibilities to manage excessive hours. This is an area for improvement.

The service can’t assure itself that all members of operational staff can meet the minimum fitness levels required to carry out the role of a firefighter. Firefighting is a physically demanding occupation, and it is essential that firefighters have sufficient levels of fitness to help them to carry out their tasks as safely and effectively as possible.

We carried out a desktop review that examined staff competencies, including compliance with annual fitness tests. At the time of the review, we found that some staff hadn’t completed their required annual fitness assessment, despite the service policy stating that all operational staff must do this each year. At the time of our review, the service told us that 82.9 percent of on-call and 89.0 percent of wholetime firefighters had an in-date fitness assessment. During our inspection, the service acknowledged that there was a gap in this area. It reported that it had since been prioritised, and most staff had now completed their fitness assessments.

Disappointingly we also found that the three-yearly medicals weren’t routinely completed. A medical is important as health professionals will examine the general health of staff against the required standards. The service told us that only 71 percent of operational staff had a valid medical. We heard from some supervisory managers that there weren’t enough resources in the occupational health department and some staff who had been referred hadn’t been seen. Senior leaders need to make sure there are appropriate strategic oversight arrangements in place for fitness tests and medicals and that operational staff complete them in line with policy. This is an area for improvement.

Some staff told us that, although decontamination procedures were in place, replacement kit could sometimes be difficult to obtain. As a result, some staff continued using their existing kit. At the time of our inspection, not all fire stations had designated decontamination zones.

Training and developing the right people with the right skills

Adequate

Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service is adequate at training and developing 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 plan. The workforce plan should set out 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. And the service should make sure that barriers to the development and progression of all staff groups have been identified and removed.

Area for improvement

The service should make sure it has a workforce plan that takes full account of the necessary skills and capabilities to carry out the 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

The service doesn't have a workforce plan, resulting in staffing gaps in some areas

The service does some workforce planning, but it doesn't take full account of the skills and capabilities it needs to effectively carry out its CRMP. The service reviews staffing levels every month, and this includes data such as retirement profiles. But this is focused on operational roles only. We found that the service didn't have a workforce plan and not all departmental heads considered succession planning.

We found limited evidence that the service's planning allowed it to fully consider workforce skills and overcome any gaps in capability. We were also told that firefighters were missing scheduled medicals, and that fire control operators were having their training sessions cancelled due to ongoing crewing shortfalls.

We recognise that the service has started a project to address this issue. It aims to bring together elements such as leadership programmes, recruitment and workforce planning into a single, co-ordinated area. Having an effective workforce plan means that the service can identify gaps in workforce capabilities and resilience. It also means that it can make sound and financially sustainable decisions about current and future needs.

The service still needs to do more to strengthen how it assesses future workforce requirements and approaches succession planning. In particular, it would benefit from creating a clearer and more explicit link between its CRMP and its strategic approach to workforce and succession planning. This is an area for improvement.

Most staff are appropriately trained for their role

In our last two inspections, we highlighted an area for improvement that the service should assure itself that all staff were appropriately trained for their role. We are pleased with the progress the service has made and have closed this area for improvement.

Most staff told us that they could access the training they needed to be effective in their roles. In our workforce survey, 93 percent of respondents (299 of 320) agreed that their service gave them the necessary training to carry out their roles. We found that most firefighters were receiving sufficient training to maintain their operational competency, and specialist prevention and protection teams received regular training. Staff we interviewed were consistently positive about both the quality of the training provided and the range of development opportunities available to them.

Training isn't just focused on operational skills. Staff told us about a range of development activities they had taken part in, including management days, shadowing placements and involvement in service-wide projects.

The service's training plans make sure staff can get the training they need to maintain competence and capability. For example, the service's analysis showed that on-call firefighters require approximately 74 hours of training to maintain their competencies. So the service divided the training into a three-year cycle, giving on-call firefighters a clearer structure and direction. This provided a more consistent and organised framework for weekly training drills, helping firefighters prioritise and plan their development more effectively.

In our workforce survey, 88 percent of respondents who had operational roles (191 of 217) agreed that they could access relevant learning and development opportunities.

Additionally, 93 percent of respondents who had non-operational roles (122 of 131) also agreed that they could access relevant learning and development opportunities.

The service has developed its competency system, which now allows it to monitor the training and skills of its staff

In our last inspection, we highlighted an area for improvement that the service should make sure its managers had an effective system to monitor the training and skills of its staff. In our latest inspection, we were encouraged to see that the service had developed its competency system to record all training, including risk-critical training for operational staff, in a centralised location. We recognise the progress made and note that the service continues to develop the system. Therefore we have closed this area for improvement.

Some staff told us that they didn't find the system user-friendly and would benefit from additional awareness training to use it effectively. We also found that a small number of supervisory managers continued to rely on separate spreadsheets to monitor the training and skills of their staff, as they lacked confidence in the system and perceived it to be unreliable.

The service regularly updates its understanding of staff skills and risk-critical safety capabilities through its training competency board. This board reports to senior leaders and escalates any issues or concerns about performance. For example, the service identified an issue with breathing apparatus competency, so it adjusted the training plan to prioritise training in this area.

The service has a range of learning and development resources

The service promotes a culture of continuous improvement throughout the organisation and it encourages staff to learn and develop. For example, we heard that staff had completed project management qualifications, and the service sponsored university degree qualifications.

We were pleased to find that the service had a range of easily accessible learning and development resources. These included an online learning hub that hosted mandatory training modules, specialist courses and leadership development programmes. Staff responsible for investigations received training and were mentored by HR people partners. These resources allow staff to do their jobs effectively.

The service had identified that some staff found it difficult to access parts of its training and development provision. We were pleased to find that it had taken proactive steps to remove these barriers. For example, the service provides reasonable adjustments for staff with neurodivergent conditions and offers support passports to help document and communicate their needs.

We spoke with some middle managers who said that they found it difficult to attend training days or take up opportunities for development due to ongoing workload pressures. We also found that some staff hadn't completed a performance development review. This limits opportunities for staff to discuss their performance, receive feedback and identify their development needs.

Ensuring fairness and diversity

Requires improvement

Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at ensuring fairness and diversity.

Recruiting, retaining and developing a diverse and 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 work with local communities. Each service should make sure that staff throughout the organisation firmly understand and show a commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). This includes successfully taking steps to remove inequality and making progress to improve EDI at all levels of the service. It should proactively encourage feedback from staff and respond to it and make sure any action it takes is meaningful.

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure it addresses barriers to recruiting people with protected characteristics or from under-represented groups, to better reflect the communities it serves.

The service should put in place effective systems, with the aim of diversifying the pool of future and current leaders.

The service should make sure it has robust processes in place to carry out equality impact assessments and review any actions agreed as a result.

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 carries out limited positive action to diversify its workforce

As part of this inspection, we reviewed a range of recruitment campaigns for wholetime firefighters, a middle manager and senior leadership roles.

The service needs to do more to make sure its recruitment policies are fair and accessible to applicants from a range of backgrounds. We found that the recruitment and selection policy hadn't been reviewed since September 2018 despite changes to the process. It states that no feedback is provided to external candidates unless there are exceptional circumstances. The policy doesn't detail what it considers to be exceptional. While we recognise that this may not be practical for roles that attract a high number of applicants, it could negatively affect future applicant rates and the service's ability to attract a diverse range of applicants.

We also found that the wholetime firefighters recruitment policy hadn't been reviewed since 2014.

We reviewed the job descriptions for three leadership roles. None had appropriate version controls and there was limited evidence that the role descriptions had been reviewed or updated. Some of the language used was outdated.

There were inconsistencies in the recruitment scoring process and limited evidence of benchmarking. In one file we reviewed, the lowest-scoring applicant was shortlisted, yet there was no clear documentation of benchmarking or pre-determined shortlisting criteria. We also found that there wasn't always an independent person or HR representative on the interview panel. The scoring methodology for the roles wasn't clearly defined, and in one interview we reviewed, panel members were sharing a single scoring sheet, despite the requirement for each panel member to score candidates independently.

Recruitment campaigns at all levels aren't directed at or accessible to under-represented groups. And the service isn't leading change in this area to increase the diversity of its workforce. For example, in our review of the latest wholetime firefighter campaign, we found that there was limited positive action, which resulted in a low number of successful applicants from diverse groups.

The service has carried out a comprehensive evaluation of its wholetime firefighter campaign, which found that under-represented applicants didn't pass various stages of the recruitment process. This provides the service with valuable information to further develop its processes, review barriers to attracting a diverse range of candidates, and make changes or improvements.

The service still needs to do more to increase staff diversity. There has been little progress to improve ethnic and gender diversity since our last inspection, which highlighted this.

During our latest inspection, the service held focus groups with diverse groups to better understand whether they see the service as a career choice and whether there are any barriers to applying, particularly for firefighter roles. However, this was more than two years after our 2023–25 inspection report was published. Furthermore, in December 2018, the service identified a risk on its corporate risk register that the diversity of its workforce didn't reflect the communities it served. We would expect the service to have made greater progress, therefore this is an area for improvement.

In 2024/25, 3 out of 59 new joiners (where ethnicity was known) were from an ethnic minority background. As at 31 March 2025, 4.1 percent of the service's staff were from an ethnic minority background compared to 14.6 percent in the local population and 6.4 percent throughout all fire and rescue services in England. However, 4.8 percent of the workforce hadn't stated their ethnicity.

As at 31 March 2025, 23.4 percent of the service's staff were women compared to an average of 20.8 percent throughout all fire and rescue services in England. The proportion of women firefighters increased from 7.5 percent (37 women) to 9 percent (45 women) during the year to 31 March 2025. The proportion of firefighters from an ethnic minority background remained the same.

In our last inspection, we highlighted an area for improvement that the service should review its on-call suitability meeting to make sure there was no bias in recruitment. During that inspection, we found inconsistencies in the suitability meetings that took place with people interested in joining as on-call firefighters. The service has now removed this meeting, therefore we have closed this area for improvement.

The service carries out some work to identify and address any barriers that disproportionately prevent individuals from particular groups from progressing, but it needs to do more. For example, there is no direct pathway for on-call firefighters to progress into wholetime roles. We heard from some fire control staff that they had encountered challenges that had hindered their progression. A few staff also reported that the service offered limited support for employees with neurodivergent conditions.

The service's approach to EDI should be improved

In our last inspection, we highlighted an area for improvement that the service should put in place effective systems with the aim of diversifying the pool of future and current leaders. Since then, the service has appointed a non-operational chief fire officer and has more women in its senior leadership team. However, we found limited evidence of positive action initiatives aimed at broadening the diversity of applicants. We also found that the service advertised all leadership roles at station manager level and below internally only. This prevented external staff from applying. The service needs to do more to attract a diverse range of applicants for leadership positions. Therefore, this remains an area for improvement.

The service would benefit from strengthening its overall approach to EDI. We found that staff and managers were required to complete an EDI e-learning package, and encouragingly, completion rates were high. We were also pleased to see that most staff had disclosed their equality data, which supports effective workforce monitoring. In addition, the service has developed its own menopause awareness training and continues to offer a range of effective menopause-friendly initiatives. In our workforce survey, 91 percent of respondents (292 of 320) agreed that they felt comfortable being themselves at work.

At the time of our inspection, the service was revising its EDI structure. However, we didn't find evidence that EDI was embedded across the wider organisation, nor that joined-up working was taking place.

The service told us that it couldn't assure itself that the diversity data for recruitment and promotion applicants was accurate, as a spreadsheet that recorded this information had become corrupt and the data was lost.

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. We found inconsistencies in the equality impact assessments that we reviewed. We also found that there were inconsistencies in the oversight process to make sure any actions were completed. This may mean the service doesn't properly assess or act on the impact on each protected characteristic. Therefore, this is an area for improvement.

The service recently established an inclusion and well-being network. The service told us that there were several other EDI staff networks, but we found that many of these were inactive. Staff told us they were unsure which networks were active and who were the leads for each area. It is too early to assess the effectiveness of the newly formed inclusion and well-being network. However, senior leaders should make sure that all staff networks receive appropriate support, have clear leadership and benefit from senior involvement where needed.

Leading people effectively

Requires improvement

Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at leading its people.

To be effective, fire and rescue services should identify and develop leaders throughout the organisation. Leaders should be able to translate and communicate the objectives of the service's community risk management plan to all staff and the public in a meaningful way. They should communicate openly, build trust, challenge unacceptable behaviour and use every contact with staff to maintain and improve a positive culture.

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure there are appropriate strategic oversight arrangements in place for all senior leaders to manage and scrutinise all functions across the service to make sure they are effective.

The service should assure itself that all leaders at all levels are acting as role models to promote a positive culture.

The service should do more to make sure staff see promotion processes as transparent and fair.

The service should improve the way staff and leaders at all levels understand and follow the performance development review process.

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

Main findings

Leaders don't always have full strategic oversight of how the service operates

The service has well-defined structures in place to support the effective implementation of its CRMP. The CRMP action plan informs day-to-day operations, making sure that activities are aligned with identified risks and prioritised accordingly.

During our inspection, we identified a consistent theme: senior leaders across the service didn't always have sufficient strategic oversight of important areas. For example, we found gaps in performance management relating to fitness testing, medicals, ensuring fairness and diversity, and the management of operational risk information. We also found weaknesses in workforce planning, the completion of annual performance reviews, and the management of processes and policies.

We found that policy documents needed stronger governance. Several policies lacked appropriate version control, clear review dates and effective management arrangements to make sure the information remained current and accurate. Without this, there is a greater risk that policies won't be kept up to date. We heard from a few staff that there were different versions in place and it was difficult to know which policy was active.

The senior leaders should make sure there is effective oversight of all areas of the service. Therefore, this is an area for improvement.

Leaders at all levels need to act as role models

As we highlighted in the section on 'Promoting, embedding and improving values and culture', the service has well-defined values which staff understand. During our inspection, all staff that we spoke to were welcoming and engaging. We also heard from staff that they felt senior leaders were thoughtful, considerate and approachable.

But we were disappointed to find that leaders at all levels didn't always act as role models. For example, we heard from one firefighter that a supervisory manager failed to intervene after a firefighter was mocked during a training exercise. We also heard that some leaders could be defensive when operational matters were raised, and that feedback didn't always reach senior leaders. In addition, some staff told us they had been "shouted at". All leaders at all levels must act as role models, therefore this is an area for improvement.

Senior leaders proactively communicate with staff across the service

Senior leaders are communicating the aims and objectives in the CRMP effectively to staff at all levels. They are doing this in a variety of ways that promote open, two-way communication. The service has a monthly managers' brief which details senior leaders' blog updates, provides opportunities to submit questions to the senior leadership team, and gives progress reports on projects across the service. These are well attended and they are recorded, so that staff can catch up either by watching the video or listening to the audio as a podcast. Staff told us about a brief where managers described the service's challenges, outlined its future plans and provided information about its financial position. We found that leaders at most levels supported this approach and made sure staff understood the aims and objectives.

As a result, staff have a high level of trust in their leaders. In our workforce survey, 83 percent of respondents (267 of 320) agreed that senior leaders clearly communicated the service's objectives. We heard from prevention staff that leaders held a workshop to discuss the CRMP objectives, which informed the development of the prevention strategy.

Most staff we spoke to understood how they contributed to the aims of the CRMP individually and as a team.

The service has clear leadership development programmes in place

In our last inspection, we highlighted as an area for improvement that the service should make sure its processes to manage and develop talent within the organisation were applied consistently. We were pleased to find that the service had well-understood arrangements in place to identify talented leaders.

The service has invested in this area and has done enough to close this area for improvement. There are talent management schemes in place to develop leaders and high-potential staff. It has introduced a suite of leadership programmes aligned with National Fire Chiefs Council products, aimed at improving and nurturing existing talent. These include the internally developed 'lead yourself' programme, which is designed for individuals at the beginning of their leadership journey. In addition, it has supervisory and middle-leadership development programmes in place.

The service has also created a focused development pathway, which is a 12-month programme for aspiring station managers. This is a positive commitment to developing internal talent, but access to the programme is limited to existing staff. The service doesn't have a direct entry scheme, which may restrict the diversity and breadth of candidates who can benefit from the pathway.

Staff clearly understand and trust career development pathways. And the service proactively removes any barriers and supports all staff in accessing leadership development opportunities. The service advertises all talent and leadership opportunities fairly through its internal platform, making sure there is open access for all staff. Most programmes are available for all staff to consider, including on-call firefighters and corporate staff.

The service doesn't have a development programme for senior leaders but uses the national executive leaders programme.

The service needs to do more to make sure the promotions process is fair and transparent

In our last inspection, we highlighted as an area for improvement that the service should do more to make sure staff saw promotion processes as transparent and fair. Disappointingly, we spoke to many operational staff who were still frustrated by the promotion process and didn't have confidence in it. In our workforce survey, 67 percent of respondents (214 of 320) agreed that the promotion process in the service was fair.

Following feedback from staff, the service had introduced development portfolios to replace assessment days. This is where operational staff must demonstrate competence by completing a programme against a required set of skills, experience and behaviours. We heard from staff that the concept of the portfolio programmes was good, but the implementation had been poor.

Some staff told us they felt that the portfolio was too long and took up too much time, making it a burden to complete and for assessors to review. We also heard from staff who said that the portfolios weren't user friendly and the process too convoluted. The service is improving these development portfolios but it should continue to talk to staff in making the necessary changes.

We found that there was a perception of nepotism within the promotions process. For example, we heard from a supervisory manager who overheard a middle manager encouraging others to apply for a role as they would be the preferred choice. We also heard about another role that wasn't advertised more widely than the watch it was on. As a result, the area for improvement that the service should do more to make sure staff see promotion processes as transparent and fair will remain.

We found that the service's approach to exit interviews was inconsistent. This means it may be missing opportunities to work with staff to find out what does and doesn't work and identify scope for improvement.

The service doesn't have good enough succession-planning processes in place to allow it to effectively manage the career pathways of its staff, including roles that need specialist skills.

It uses temporary promotions appropriately to fill short-term resourcing gaps. As at 31 March 2025, 6.1 percent of the workforce were on temporary promotion. The average length of temporary promotions was 228 days, which is lower than the England average of 295 days.

Not all staff have completed a performance review

The service isn't doing all it can to equip its leaders to lead effectively.

We found that senior leaders had collective and organisational objectives. While we recognise that organisational objectives are appropriate for some areas, there were no individual performance objectives in place. This makes it difficult to hold senior leaders to account for their areas of responsibility. And it makes personal development difficult to track.

The service has an inconsistent process in place for leaders to manage performance and development. Not all staff have specific and individual objectives or have had their performance assessed in the past year.

We were disappointed to find that, as at 31 March 2025, only 47.3 percent of on-call and 67.2 percent of wholetime firefighters had completed a performance development review in the previous 12 months. In support teams, 58.1 percent of support staff and 77.8 percent of fire control staff had done so. We recognise that the service plans to introduce a new performance development review system in the second quarter of 2026 for support staff and in 2027 for operational staff. But it needs to make sure that all staff have specific and individual objectives and have their performance assessed regularly. This is an area for improvement.

Not all staff are being held to account for not performing

Leaders aren't always equipped to confidently manage staff performance and deal with any poor performance or behavioural issues.

The service needs to develop its performance management systems so that leaders can effectively assess and develop the individual performance of all staff members. In the absence of an effective performance development review system and clear objectives for all staff, not all leaders will be able to address poor performance.

We heard from some leaders that there was a lack of accountability across the service, with concerns that managers weren't consistently holding staff to account for underperformance. Some staff told us that the service tended to focus on allocating blame during investigations rather than fostering a positive learning culture.

Although performance management training is available, at the time of our inspection it wasn't mandatory. Making leadership and management courses compulsory would expose all managers to a broader range of scenarios, helping them to build the confidence and capabilities required for more senior responsibilities. It would also support more consistent and effective performance management across the service.

In our workforce survey, 78 percent of respondents (248 of 320) agreed that the service's performance management systems allowed them to achieve their potential.

hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk