

Fire and rescue services 2025–27

Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service

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Overall summary

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

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

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 Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service in March 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 Cheshire 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

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

The service is urban with significant rural communities and covers an area of 906 square miles. It has a population of 1.1 million, which is growing.

Governance for this service is the responsibility of Cheshire [fire and rescue authority](#).

In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service cost £47.94 per head of population, which was less than the England average of £51.71.

I congratulate Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service on its excellent performance in keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks.

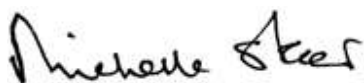
We were pleased to find that the service had made progress since [our 2023 inspection](#). For example, it had improved how it gathers and records relevant and up-to-date risk information to help protect firefighters, the public and property during an emergency.

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

- The service is improving the diversity of leadership roles through several leadership and development programmes.
- The service appropriately allocates resources to achieve its prevention and protection strategies.
- The service uses sophisticated computer software and a wide range of information and data to identify the risk to people, places and firefighters.
- The service has suitable business continuity plans in place for industrial action, which have been rigorously exercised and tested.
- There is limited evidence that the service carries out meaningful [benchmarking](#) or cost-benefit analysis.
- The service effectively uses several firefighter duty systems to maximise fire cover and prevention and protection activity.

Staff told us that senior leaders clearly communicated the service's objectives, and we found that staff understood their role in achieving those objectives. Senior leaders demonstrate positive behaviours throughout the service and take action to eliminate bullying, [harassment](#) and discrimination. They actively listen and act on staff feedback to create a positive workplace culture. The service effectively identifies future leaders and provides several pathways to leadership, through learning and the development of talent. Managers receive training on people skills, such as recruitment and selection, discipline and grievances and performance management, which equips them to effectively manage the performance of teams and individual staff members.

Overall, I commend the service on the changes it has made and expect it to continue working to further improve in the areas we have identified.



Michelle Skeer OBE QPM

His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies

Good

Cheshire 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 uses information from a wide range of sources to build a comprehensive risk profile

The service has assessed a suitable range of risks and threats using a thorough [community risk management planning](#) process. In its assessment of risk, it uses information it has collected from a range of internal and external sources and datasets, taking account of both local and national risk registers. This includes historical incident data, census data and societal data.

When appropriate, the service has consulted and talked to its communities and other relevant parties to understand risk and outline how it intends to mitigate it. For example, it has spoken to staff, members of the public, other emergency services, trade union representatives, business owners, local charities and local authorities. The service used a wide range of methods to effectively consult on its community risk management proposals. These included social media, consultation roadshows, online surveys, staff focus groups, radio advertisements and workshops.

The service told us that it worked with more than 5,000 people over a 13-week period. The Consultation Institute independently assessed its consultation programme for good practice.

The service has an effective community risk management plan

Once it has assessed the identified risks, the service records its findings in an easily understood plan called the community risk management plan (CRMP). 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's CRMP clearly identifies and describes the main hazards it aims to mitigate. These include:

- an aging population;
- young people living with mental health issues;
- flooding risk;
- wildfire risk;
- water risks;
- road risks; and
- emerging technology, such as electric cars and battery-energy storage systems.

It plans to mitigate the risks through improved targeting of its prevention work, including:

- [safe and well visits](#);
- working more closely with its partners in the police, social care services, local councils and housing associations;
- implementing a new road safety strategy;
- expanding its water safety programme; and
- providing business fire safety training for operational managers within the service.

The arrangements described in the plan also take account of the issues identified in the service's corporate risk register, which could compromise implementing the CRMP. These include the potential financial impact arising from the risk of funding uncertainties. The CRMP states that the service plans to carry out more risk-reducing prevention and protection activity and provide an improved response at no additional cost.

The CRMP covers a four-year period (2024–28) and is reviewed annually. This annual review makes sure that the service can monitor and adapt to changes in its risk profile.

The service has industrial action plans in place to make sure it can continue to provide a minimum level of critical functions during periods of industrial action. At the time of our inspection, it had recently tested these plans through an extensive business continuity exercise.

The service effectively monitors performance against its CRMP objectives

Senior leaders have effective monitoring, feedback and scrutiny arrangements in place to make sure the aims they have set out in the CRMP for prevention, protection and response are being achieved.

Where the service isn't meeting its commitments to the public, senior leaders are fully aware of emerging issues and are holding leaders at all levels to account. Departmental leaders provide the senior leadership team with quarterly updates on the progress made against implementing the CRMP.

The service uses the CRMP to inform departmental and district plans, which feed down into station plans and staff appraisals. This means that staff across the service have a good understanding of their role in implementing the CRMP and of CRMP-related risks.

The service has effective 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 that 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 the authority 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. The service's senior leaders and departmental leaders provide the fire and rescue authority's performance and overview committee with frequent progress reports on the implementation of the CRMP.

Preventing fires and other risks

Good

Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service is good 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.

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 prioritises those most at risk of fire and other emergencies

The service's prevention strategy is contained within its [community risk management plan](#) and is clearly aligned with the risks identified in the plan. These include an aging population, young people living with mental health issues and water and road-related risks.

Leaders responsible for prevention have clearly communicated the strategy and main prevention aims to the workforce. As a result, prevention staff understand how the work they carry out contributes individually and as a team to the prevention aims of the service.

During [our 2023 inspection](#), we highlighted as an [area for improvement](#) that the service should make sure it allocates enough resources to meet its prevention strategy. Since our 2023 inspection, the service has completed a full review of its prevention department. This has resulted in a restructure of the department, which allows the service to effectively implement its prevention strategy. It has also improved its prevention work by introducing a dedicated persons-at-heightened-risk team. This team specialises in providing prevention interventions to the most vulnerable or most at-risk people. We have closed this area for improvement.

The service's teams work well together and with other relevant organisations on prevention. They share relevant information when needed. The service works closely with local councils and NHS social care, mental health and fall prevention teams to target people considered vulnerable and at greater risk of fire. Its collaboration with these organisations has contributed to the high levels of targeted visits it carries out. In the year ending 31 March 2025, 97.5 percent (28,558 of 29,280) of its visits were to households that had at least one vulnerable person.

The service uses information to adjust its planning assumptions and direct activity between its prevention, protection and response functions. For example, staff in its prevention and protection teams make risk information, which covers issues such as defective fire safety equipment or vulnerability data, available to other teams via electronic forms. The service uses this information to adjust planning assumptions and direct activity between its functions. It may also use it for operational response decisions.

The service targets its prevention activity at those most at risk from fire and other emergencies

The service uses a risk-based approach to clearly prioritise its prevention activity towards people most at risk from fire and other emergencies. For example, it prioritises [safe and well visits](#) based on risk. It focuses these visits on people referred to the service by partners such as the police, social care services, housing associations and NHS fall prevention teams.

The service uses a range of data to target its prevention activity at vulnerable people and groups including those from [seldom-heard communities](#). It uses a structured domestic premises assessment programme system to identify and prioritise households at greatest risk. It merges historic Exeter data (on patients aged over 65 who are registered with GPs) with newer Cheshire predictive data. Households are risk rated based on factors such as age, living alone, distance to fire stations, smoking and drinking habits, housing tenure and consumer profiling. This produces clear lists of vulnerable people (ranked in descending order as platinum, gold, silver or bronze). Firefighters and prevention team members work through these lists, with the service's newly created persons-at-heightened-risk team targeting the highest-risk people.

The service carries out a range of interventions and campaigns, which it adapts to the level of risk in its communities. It also carries out safe and well visits. These visits build on standard [home fire safety checks](#), which allow for referrals to other organisations where necessary and additional health checks such as blood pressure readings and atrial fibrillation screenings.

The service has a dedicated road and water safety lead and works in partnership with the Cheshire Constabulary and local authority road safety teams. Road safety is part of station action plans. Each year, safety interventions are focused on a particular group, such as young drivers or vulnerable road users. The service collaborates with Cheshire East Council to provide road safety education programmes in schools. It also works with other local councils on road safety issues through the Cheshire Road Safety Group. However, the group's road safety strategy hasn't yet been approved due to the differing priorities of road safety partners.

The service uses several methods to share prevention messages, including social media, local radio, printed materials and face-to-face talks at events such as fairs and roadshows. Campaigns are tailored to local risk profiles identified in the community risk management plan. The service's campaigns calendar includes areas such as home fire safety, road safety and water safety. Examples include seasonal campaigns such as winter fire safety and summer water safety. The service works with local authorities, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and road safety partners to reach high-risk groups.

Safety advice materials are produced in different languages and accessible formats, including easy-read versions. The service also uses community champions and faith leaders to reach minority groups. It works with integrated care boards, housing providers and third-sector organisations to share messages through their networks, which improves contact with typically hard-to-reach communities. The service also uses targeted social media advertising to reach younger audiences and those in rural areas, which complements traditional communication methods.

Staff are trained to carry out safe and well visits

Staff told us they had the right skills and the confidence to carry out safe and well visits. These visits cover an appropriate range of hazards that can put vulnerable people at greater risk from fire and other emergencies. In addition to fire safety advice, staff can provide loneliness and isolation referrals, smoking cessation advice and alcohol awareness information. During a visit, the service will determine if specialist equipment is required, such as specialist smoke alarms for people with a hearing impairment, fireproof letterbox covers, fire-retardant bedding and throws and portable fire suppression units.

The service carries out proportionate quality assurance of its safe and well visit activity. It has a dedicated quality assurance manager who covers both prevention and protection work. Its quality assurance process includes direct observation of safe and well visits and auditing the information gathered during visits. The findings are used to inform future training plans and policy updates.

The service evaluates the effectiveness of its prevention activity

The service has good evaluation tools in place to measure how effective its prevention activity is and to make sure that all sections of its communities get appropriate access to prevention services that meet their needs. For example, the service tailors its campaigns to local risk profiles identified in the community risk management plan.

It evaluates performance by monitoring outputs. These include the number of safe and well visits completed, the referrals made to health partners and the uptake of additional health interventions such as blood pressure checks and atrial fibrillation screenings. Where possible, the service asks for feedback from its partners on outcomes such as reduced smoking rates or successful GP referrals following health screenings.

The service reviews its partnerships and prevention activities through formal boards and internal meetings. It has shown willingness to step back from initiatives that don't result in measurable benefits and to reallocate its resources to those that do.

The service uses data from fire investigations and [serious case reviews](#) to identify emerging risks and adapt prevention strategies accordingly.

It takes account of feedback from the public, other organisations and other parts of the service when planning its prevention activities. One of the ways it does this is through a text and email feedback process. The service told us that a high proportion of occupants who provided feedback after a safe and well visit said it had changed their view on fires and safety in their home. 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.

The service works well with other organisations to reduce risk

The service works with a range of other organisations to prevent fires and other emergencies. These include [Youth Fed](#), HM Prison Service, Network Rail, the Canal & River Trust and Papyrus, a national suicide prevention charity.

The service works innovatively with others to promote community safety. For example, it works with Manchester Performing Arts College to promote fire, water and road safety through drama. College students research the safety topics and convey safety messages to primary school [children](#) through a drama production.

In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service carried out 29,280 safe and well visits. Of these, 3,132 were based on referrals from other agencies and 671 led to the service making an onward referral to at least one other organisation. In the same period, it carried out 25.7 safe and well visits per 1,000 population. This was higher than the national rate of 10.0.

We found good evidence that the service routinely referred people at greatest risk to organisations that may better meet their needs. These organisations included the police, social care services, housing associations, charities and fall prevention teams. The service also has arrangements in place to receive referrals from other organisations, and it acts appropriately on the referrals it receives. For example, it uses a triage system to rate referrals by risk and to prioritise activity.

The service routinely exchanges information with other public sector organisations about the people and groups at greatest risk. It uses this information to challenge planning assumptions and target prevention activity. For example, it has increased its water safety campaign activity and partnership work following an increase in water-related deaths. It chairs a multi-agency water safety group that is attended by local authorities, the police, the Canal & River Trust and Network Rail.

The service effectively responds to safeguarding concerns, but record keeping could be improved

Staff told us about occasions when they had identified [safeguarding](#) problems. They told us that they felt confident and trained to act appropriately and promptly. All staff complete mandatory e-learning safeguarding training as a minimum. Some prevention staff complete further training, including advanced safeguarding and safeguarding for managers. However, the prevention files we viewed lacked clarity on whether safeguarding concerns had been dealt with. The system the service uses to record safeguarding cases doesn't clearly show if a safeguarding case is open. This could result in cases being missed, delayed or duplicated.

The service has effective arrangements to tackle fire-setting behaviour

In the year ending 30 June 2025, the service attended 965 deliberate fire incidents, which had increased from 694 in the previous year. The rate of attendance at deliberate fire incidents was 84.7 per 100,000 population in the year ending 30 June 2025. This was lower than the England rate of 125.

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 clear programme for tackling fire-setting behaviour among children and young people. The programme is provided by 18 trained staff under the service's new prevention model. It includes targeted interventions, such as education and diversionary measures, to direct young people at heightened risk away from risky behaviour.

The service is part of multi-agency prison working groups and is trialling targeted interventions and diversionary tactics. These include fire safety education and operational awareness training for prison staff. It also provides intelligence on emerging trends, such as improvised ignition methods, and shares this through UK fire investigation networks.

When appropriate, the service routinely shares information with relevant organisations to support the prosecution of arsonists. When deliberate fires occur, the service carries out a fire investigation and completes a fire investigation report. To support prosecution, it also completes police notification reports for deliberate fires and works with local police leads to make sure that evidence is gathered.

The service also works closely with local prisons to tackle deliberate fire-setting behaviour among inmates, which has led to a significant reduction in incidents at HMP Risley. Deliberate fire-setting in prison can result in additional sentencing, and the service's fire investigation reports have a significant role in this process.

Protecting the public through fire regulation

Good

Cheshire 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's protection strategy is clearly linked to its community risk management plan

The service's protection strategy is contained within its [community risk management plan](#) and is clearly aligned with the risks identified in the plan.

Leaders responsible for protection have clearly communicated the strategy and main 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 protection activity and effectively share information as needed. Information is effectively shared between prevention, protection and response staff. For example, firefighters carry out low-risk business fire safety visits and provide advice on how to comply with fire safety regulations. They share fire safety issues that can't be addressed at the time of the visit with specialist protection teams for further action. The service then uses this information to adjust planning assumptions and direct activity between its prevention, protection and response functions. This means that it properly aligns its resources with risk.

The service effectively targets high-risk buildings

The service's risk-based intervention programme is focused on the highest-risk buildings. The service uses data from the [Ordnance Survey's AddressBase Premium database](#) of properties and building information held on its internal software system, SAFFIRE, to create a list of buildings and their associated risk levels. This allows the service to prioritise its resources and its fire safety audit activity based on risk.

As at 31 March 2025, the service had identified 2,115 high-risk premises that required inspection over a two-year period. These included:

- care homes;
- [houses in multiple occupation](#);
- [Control of Major Accident Hazards sites](#);
- heritage premises; and
- buildings above 11 m in height.

We found that the service hadn't achieved its high-risk audit target for year one of its risk-based inspection programme. However, data provided by the service showed that it was making up this shortfall and was likely to achieve its overall target at the end of the two-year programme.

In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service's high-risk building audit target was 1,240, but it only carried out 796. This means it achieved 64.2 percent of its target. The service told us that this was due to resources being diverted to other work, such as extensive data cleansing and a complex prosecution case that required many protection staff to collate evidence and attend court hearings.

The service has allocated enough resources to meet its protection strategy

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 had 35 competent protection staff trained to [Level 4 Diploma in Fire Safety](#). This was an increase on the 22 it had in the previous year. This helps the service to provide the range of audit and enforcement activity needed now and in the future.

Staff get the right training and work to appropriate accreditation. The service is fully aligned with the [National Fire Chiefs Council's](#) national competency framework and protection fire standard. Its quality management systems have ISO 9001 certification from the International Organization for Standardization. It also has five protection staff members on the contextualised auditors register, which the National Fire Chiefs Council and the Institution of Fire Engineers oversee.

The service adapts to new legislative requirements 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.

This legislation has 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 has a dedicated high-rise building lead. It has established a working group to address the [Grenfell Tower Inquiry recommendations](#). Protection staff and firefighters have carried out joint inspections of all high-rise buildings in Cheshire. The service has also carried out a building risk review, which allows the highest-risk buildings to be prioritised and makes sure that remediation work is being carried out. The impact of remedial work has been factored into the service's risk-based inspection programme.

The service is supporting the [Building Safety Regulator](#). It has worked with other fire and rescue services to consider the implications of the regulations. It expects these arrangements to have limited impact on its other protection activity.

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 had good arrangements in place to receive this information. When it doesn't receive the right information, it takes action. And it updates accordingly the risk information it gives its operational staff.

For most high-rise buildings, the [accountable person](#) has submitted the relevant building information to the service. But for those buildings where this information hasn't been supplied, the service has collected it through the site-specific risk inspection process.

The service carries out fire safety audits 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 applies;
- after enforcement action had been taken; or
- 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. It uses a national template to record categories such as audit outcomes, any support provided to help building owners comply with fire safety legislation and authorisation from team leaders and senior managers for further support where required.

The service makes relevant information from its audits available to operational teams and [control room](#) staff. For example, we found evidence that it shared details of [prohibition notices](#) (legal notices preventing or restricting the use of a building where there is a serious risk to people in the event of a fire) with firefighters, the control room and local authorities.

The service quality assures its protection activity, but it could improve its record keeping

The service carries out proportionate quality assurance of its protection activity. Inspecting officers are quality assured four times a year. This includes reviews of inspectors' audit files and line managers carrying out on-site observations of inspections. The National Fire Chiefs Council's North West Protection Group also provides periodic [peer reviews](#).

However, we found that the system used to record quality assurance wasn't effective. Instead of recording quality assurance details on audit forms, the service was recording them on individual performance and development records. This makes it difficult to effectively monitor the quality assurance of audits.

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. It gathers feedback through post-visit surveys.

The service's enforcement activities are proportionate to risk

The service consistently uses its full range of enforcement powers and, when appropriate, it prosecutes those who don't comply with fire safety regulations. We found evidence that the service took enforcement action against businesses that had failed to comply with fire safety regulations. The service also provides 24-hour access to specialist protection advice to help identify and address any fire safety issues.

In the year ending 31 March 2025, there were 166 unsatisfactory audits, which led to the service carrying out 186 enforcement activities:

- 108 informal notifications
- 45 enforcement notices
- 1 alteration notices
- 31 prohibition notices
- 1 prosecution.

It carried out nine prosecutions in the five years from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2025.

The service works well with partners to carry out joint enforcement

The service works closely with other enforcement agencies to regulate fire safety, and it routinely exchanges risk information with them. This has included a joint fire safety inspection of Chester Racecourse, which it carried out with the police, the local licensing authority, the local immigration authority and Trading Standards. The service has also carried out joint inspections of shopping centres to target illegal activity and fire risks associated with living above shops.

The service attends [safety advisory groups](#) with the police, ambulance services, local authorities and event organisers to share and receive risk information. Examples include temporary risk information about events, such as Creamfields festival and the Royal Cheshire County Show.

The service works closely with hospitals and attends hospital working groups to share information and address any identified fire-safety issues. It carries out joint inspections of entertainment venues with the local licensing authority and of houses in multiple occupation with local authorities. The service has an asylum accommodation lead who works with businesses and hotels that house asylum seekers.

We found that the service had ten [primary authority scheme](#) partnerships. These are managed by a dedicated officer and implemented on a cost-neutral basis.

The service continues to effectively respond to building consultations

In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service responded to 96 percent of building consultations (724 of 754) within the required time frame. This means it consistently meets its statutory responsibility to comment on fire safety arrangements at new and altered buildings.

In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service also responded to 94.9 percent of licensing consultations (370 of 390) on time.

The service told us that it didn't meet its target of responding to 100 percent of building and licensing consultations within the required time frame due to other departmental demands, such as data cleansing and a complex prosecution cases.

The service works well with businesses to improve fire safety

The service proactively works with local businesses and other organisations to promote compliance with fire safety legislation. It gives presentations to businesses to raise awareness on fire safety. For example, it has held events for owners of care homes to highlight the importance of fire safety and their legal obligations. It has also provided training and awareness sessions on [risk assessments](#) for business owners.

The service carries out safety visits at low-risk premises to provide fire safety advice to business owners

The service has a dedicated business safety team that carries out quarterly business safety events, which concentrate on areas of high non-compliance. It has a dedicated heritage officer who works with businesses to provide advice and guidance. For example, the heritage officer has provided advice on the installation of modern fire safety equipment in a heritage building. The service also has a hazardous installations officer who works with Control of Major Accident Hazards sites and other high-risk sites to make sure that premises are suitably protected.

The service provides businesses with information and guidance on the benefits of collaboration, enforcement, legislation and consultations. It also offers business owners and managers free templates and tools for carrying out fire safety measures such as risk assessments and fire drills.

Responding to fires and other emergencies

Good

Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service is good at responding to fires and other emergencies.

Fire and rescue services must be able to respond to a range of incidents such as fires, road traffic collisions and other emergencies in their areas.

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 continues to align its resources to the risks identified in its community risk management plan

The service's response strategy is contained within its [community risk management plan](#) and is clearly aligned with the risks identified in the plan.

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. For example, since [our 2023 inspection](#), the service has carried out a fire cover review. This has resulted in new and redistributed resources throughout the service, which include firefighters specially trained in water rescue and wildfire fighting and associated specialist equipment.

The service uses a range of firefighter duty systems to maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of its workforce. These include:

- [wholetime](#) – 11 wholetime fire engines, available 24 hours a day, crewed by full-time firefighters;
- day crewing – 5 day-crewed fire engines, available 24 hours a day, crewed by full-time firefighters;

- nucleus – 1 nucleus fire engine at Macclesfield, available 12 hours a day, crewed by full-time firefighters;
- nucleus shared crewing – 2 fire engines covering Birchwood and Stockton Heath stations, available 12 hours a day, crewed on alternate days by full-time firefighters;
- weekday crewing – 4 fire engines based at Frodsham, Alsager, Macclesfield or Winsford, crewed by full-time firefighters during the day Monday to Friday who provide dynamic fire cover across [on-call](#) station areas when on-call fire engines aren't available; and
- on-call – 12 on-call fire engines, crewed by firefighters who live or work near their base station and can get to the station within 5 minutes of being notified.

The service continues to consistently meets its response standards

The service has set out response standards in its community risk management plan and consistently meets its standard of responding to [primary fires](#) within ten minutes. This response time is calculated from the time the service receives a 999 call to the time fire engines arrive at the scene.

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 MHCLG produces.

MHCLG data shows that in the year ending 30 June 2025, the service's average response time to primary fires was 9 minutes and 44 seconds. This was faster than the average for services that are urban with significant rural communities.

Using this measure, the service's average response time increased slightly from 9 minutes and 29 seconds in the year to 30 June 2024. This decline was predominantly due to an increase in drive time, which increased from 6 minutes and 33 seconds to 6 minutes and 45 seconds during the same period.

The service's overall availability of fire engines supports its response standard

In the year ending 31 March 2025, availability of wholetime fire engines was 99.7 percent. This was the same as the previous year. During the same period, availability of on-call fire engines was 54.2 percent. This was a decrease from the previous year when availability was 58.3 percent. This remains above the service's on-call availability target of 52.0 percent, which it told us was required to maintain its fire cover standard. However, during one month in the year ending 31 March 2025, on-call fire engine availability at one station dropped to 5.0 percent.

The service is aware of the drop in on-call availability and has taken actions to improve fire cover without relying on on-call firefighters. This includes using weekday-crewed fire engines to cover on-call station areas during periods of low availability.

The service's response strategy clearly explains its coverage model. The service told us that it consisted of three levels:

1. Critical – 14 fire engines – the absolute minimum number of fire engines the service should have available, and it aims to meet this level 100 percent of the time;
2. Optimum – 18 fire engines – allows the service to meet the 10-minute response standard and manage 85 percent of overall demand without any support from neighbouring fire and rescue services; and
3. Resilience – 23 fire engines – allows the service to meet the 10-minute response standard and manage 98 percent of overall demand without any support from neighbouring fire and rescue services.

During our 2023 inspection, we highlighted as an [area for improvement](#) that the service should make sure it has adequate resources available for future industrial action. Its plans to provide an effective response to fires and other emergencies during periods of industrial action weren't clear.

During this inspection, we found that it had updated its business continuity plans and completed a rigorous business continuity exercise to test them. The service told us that it felt confident that it was well prepared to respond to fires and other emergencies during periods of industrial action. We have closed this area for improvement.

The service has improved how it gathers and maintains risk information

The service routinely collects and updates information about the highest-risk people, places and threats it has identified. This includes information gathered through site-specific risk information (SSRI) inspections and [safe and well visits](#).

In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service identified 1,690 sites that posed more risk to firefighters if an incident took place. During the same period, the service visited 1,252 sites to update its records and familiarise itself with the firefighting risks at the sites. This was an increase from the previous year when the service completed 1,138 visits.

This information is readily available for the service's prevention, protection and response staff. This means that these teams can identify and reduce risk effectively. For example, we saw risk information relating to the Bolesworth International horse show held in the grounds of Bolesworth Castle. It included site-specific risks, operational considerations and site plans. Where appropriate, the service shares risk information with other organisations, such as the police, ambulance services and local authorities. It also shares risk information with neighbouring fire and rescue services for high-risk buildings within 10 km of its border.

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](#). During our 2023 inspection, we highlighted as an area for improvement that 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.

During this inspection, the information we reviewed was up to date and accurate. Staff could easily access and understand it. Encouragingly, it had been completed with input from the service's prevention, protection and response functions when appropriate. We have closed this area for improvement.

The service carries out a comprehensive quality assurance process of its SSRI. Line managers or subject matter experts, including fire safety officers, audit all risk. Once the information has been collated and quality assured, it is shared with fire control via an electronic system and made available to firefighters through [mobile data terminals](#).

The service told us that it expected firefighters to complete SSRI visits every month, the results of which must be published within 28 days of the visit. The scheduling of SSRI visits is done via a risk register that automatically sets revisit dates. This process aims to improve its service to the public and reduce risk to firefighters.

Staff have a good understanding of how to command incidents safely

The service has incident commanders who are trained and regularly assessed. This includes two days of training every year and revalidation assessments every two years. In addition, strategic-level incident commanders also complete [multi-agency gold incident command](#) training. This helps the service to safely, assertively and 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. We found that they were familiar with [risk assessing](#), decision-making and recording information at incidents in line with national best practice as well as the [Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles](#).

In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service had 215 accredited incident commanders, which met its demand.

[Control room](#) staff have a crucial role in the safe and effective management of incidents. They told us that they were able to make [mobilising](#) decisions such as altering the predetermined attendance at incidents (the number and type of resources sent to an incident) based on the initial information received from the caller.

The service has improved its monitoring and sharing of operational learning

As part of our inspection, we reviewed a range of emergency incidents and training events. These included major incidents, fires in domestic and commercial properties, road traffic collisions, water rescues and other complex incidents and exercises.

During our 2023 inspection, we highlighted as an area for improvement that the service should make sure it has an effective system for learning from operational incidents. The service didn't always act on learning it had or should have identified from incidents. This meant that it wasn't routinely improving its service to the public.

During this inspection, we were pleased to find that the service consistently followed its policies to make sure that staff commanded incidents in line with operational guidance. The service assesses operational performance, records any learning and effectively shares this with staff. We have closed this area for improvement.

The service's debrief policy clearly explains the different types of debriefs and when they should be carried out. These include:

- on-scene debrief – carried out at the scene immediately following an incident;
- structured debrief – carried out within eight weeks of the incident; and
- multi-agency debrief – usually led by the [Cheshire Resilience Forum](#) following a declared major incident or other complex multi-agency operation.

The debriefs we sampled were carried out in line with the service's policy. We found that debrief feedback was provided to the service's operational learning board. Identified learning is shared with staff through a range of methods including monthly operational learning bulletins and safety notifications.

The service has purchased learning software that allows it to provide learning material in a visual, interactive and engaging way. It is used to create the monthly learning bulletins. Staff spoke positively about this.

The service has responded to learning from incidents to improve its services to the public. For example, following the service's response to a fire at a prison, learning from the debrief identified that firefighters' use of petrol-powered positive pressure ventilation fans wasn't appropriate. As a result, the service is trialling electric positive pressure ventilation fans.

The service updates internal risk information with the information it receives. It shares risk information gathered during incidents with prevention, protection and control room staff. And it exchanges this information with appropriate organisations, such as the police, ambulance services, housing associations and local authorities.

Fire control room staff are regularly involved in training, exercises and debriefs

We were pleased to find that the service's control room staff were integrated into its command, training, exercise, debrief and assurance activity. Control room staff are invited to contribute to debriefs following incidents and exercises. We saw examples of control room staff taking part in marauding terrorist attack exercises and complex building fire incidents that involved [fire survival guidance](#) and immediate building evacuation. Control room staff told us that they had also completed exercises and training in fallback arrangements and backup procedures in the event of a system failure.

The service's policies and training programmes are aligned with national standards

The service makes sure that its policies are in line with [national operational guidance](#). It has used the [National Fire Chiefs Council's](#) gap analysis tool to identify where its policies aren't aligned with national operational guidance and to record the reason for this lack of alignment. The service's operational training is aligned with national operational guidance.

The service has introduced an effective electronic system to share fire survival guidance information

During our 2023 inspection, we highlighted as an area for improvement that the service should make sure that it has an effective method for sharing fire survival guidance information with multiple callers and that it has a dedicated communication link in place.

At incidents involving large numbers of people, fire and rescue services receive a high volume of simultaneous emergency calls. During our 2023 inspection we found that the service relied too heavily on paper-based systems.

During this inspection, we were pleased to find that the service had introduced a suitable electronic system, provided staff training and carried out rigorous testing and exercising. Staff told us that they felt confident using the system and had successfully used it during this type of incident. We have closed this area for improvement.

Responding to major and multi-agency incidents

Good

Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service is good 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).

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

Main findings

The service is well prepared 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](#). These risks and threats include flooding, wildfires, industrial fires and terrorist attacks.

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 fires/incidents at high-risk premises, such as hospitals, high-rise buildings, care homes and industrial sites. Firefighters have access to risk information from neighbouring services. They can access site-specific risk information for high-risk sites located up to 10 km past the border of neighbouring services. This information is available through [mobile data terminals](#) on fire engines.

The service has effective arrangements in place to respond to major and multi-agency incidents

During this inspection, we considered how well prepared the service is to respond to foreseeable major incidents including severe weather events, wildfires, flooding, incidents involving hazardous materials and terrorist attacks.

We found that the service had well-developed policies and procedures in place for safely managing these incident types. Staff at all levels understand them, and robust training and exercises have taken place to test them. For example, the service carried out a large-scale, multi-agency exercise at Chester Racecourse to test its response to a marauding terrorist attack.

The service is working with other emergency responders to make local communities more resilient. Through the [Cheshire Resilience Forum](#), it works closely with its partners in the police, ambulance service and local authorities to improve community safety. The service provides social resilience education at its education centre, Safety Central. This prepares communities for major incidents such as flooding.

The service has a duty to warn, inform and advise the public if an emergency occurs or is likely to occur. We found that it had a warn and inform policy that provided details and guidance to staff. Incident commanders receive media training and have access to media support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week if needed.

We also reviewed the service's response to a major incident it declared. The incident involved a fire in a timber-framed residential building. The service contributed to the multi-agency debrief following the incident and implemented learning from it.

As a result of this, the service can show that the plans it has in place to declare and effectively respond to major incidents are fit for purpose. It uses a suitable command structure to effectively respond to major incidents and has regular meetings with partners, including the police and ambulance service, through tactical and strategic co-ordination groups. This allows multi-agency plans to be established and effectively implemented.

The service has effective arrangements in place to work with other fire and rescue services

The service supports other fire and rescue services when they are responding to emergency incidents. It has six neighbouring fire and rescue services: Merseyside, Greater Manchester, Derbyshire, Staffordshire, Shropshire and North Wales. It is interoperable with these services and can form part of a multi-agency response. It has [mutual aid](#) arrangements in place with all its neighbouring services. Several of the service's firefighters are trained to [national inter-agency liaison officer](#) level. This allows them to effectively liaise with other agencies including the police, ambulance services, HM Coastguard and the military.

The service has successfully deployed resources to other services and has used [national resilience assets](#) such as high-volume pumps. The requesting and deploying of national assets works particularly well at a regional level due to the joint North West Fire Control centre.

Incident commanders have a good understanding of Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles

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

The service could give us strong evidence that it consistently follows JESIP. This included sharing risk information through tactical and strategic co-ordination groups at larger, more complex incidents. This allowed responders to effectively communicate and co-ordinate activity and make sure that there was joint understanding of risk and situational awareness, in line with JESIP principles.

We sampled a range of debriefs the service had carried out after multi-agency incidents and exercises. We were pleased to find that the service had identified any problems it had with applying JESIP and took appropriate, prompt action with other emergency services. One example related to the use of [M/ETHANE](#) messages to share risk information with responders. A multi-agency debrief identified that these messages were too long and unclear. As a result, the local forum's interoperability board was asked to consider updating the major incident response guidance. However, at the time of our inspection, this action was still outstanding.

The service frequently carries out 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. Cross-border exercising allows fire and rescue services to identify any major differences in their procedures, policies and equipment. It also allows a service to identify the joint risks on its borders and carry out exercises to prepare for situations where multiple fire and rescue services are likely to respond together.

In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service completed 42 training exercises with neighbouring fire and rescue services. In the same year, the service's rate of training exercises with neighbouring fire and rescue services was 72.9 per 1,000 full-time equivalent firefighters. This was higher than the England rate of 24.5.

The service is an active and valued member of the Cheshire Resilience Forum

The service has good arrangements in place to respond to emergencies with agencies that make up the Cheshire Resilience Forum. These arrangements include information sharing and regular testing and exercising to plan and prepare for a range of emergencies. The forum is based at the service's headquarters, which helps to improve working arrangements.

The service is a valued member of the forum, which the chief fire officer chairs. The service is a member of all strategic, tactical and operational subgroups, including risk management, warn and inform and cyber resilience groups. It 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. The forum's arrangements include multi-agency, site-specific response plans for several high-risk sites, including all of the county's [Control of Major Accident Hazards sites](#).

The service continues to share and contribute to 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.

One person within the service is responsible for receiving national operational learning and sharing it with other fire and rescue services. They also receive joint organisational learning and share it with other emergency partners. The service discusses joint organisational learning and national operational learning at its operational learning board to decide what, if any, further action to take.

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

Good

Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service is good 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.

Promising practice

The service effectively uses its duty systems to maximise fire cover and its prevention and protection activity

The service uses a range of firefighter duty systems to improve fire cover and workforce productivity. These include:

- [wholetime](#) – available 24 hours a day;
- day crewing – crewed by wholetime firefighters who are at the station during the daytime and respond from nearby service-provided housing in the evenings – available 24 hours a day;
- nucleus – crewed by full-time firefighters, 12 hours a day, every day;
- nucleus shared crewing – crewed on alternate days by full-time firefighters, 12 hours a day, every day;

- weekday crewing – crewed by full-time firefighters during the daytime Monday to Friday who provide dynamic fire cover across the [on-call](#) station areas when on-call fire engines aren't available; and
- on-call – crewed by firefighters who live or work near their base station and can get to the station within five minutes of being notified.

These duty systems have maximised workforce productivity and improved fire cover. This means that when firefighters aren't responding to emergency incidents, their time is used efficiently on tasks such as [safe and well visits](#), fire safety inspections and gathering risk information. This helps the service to achieve the objectives in its [community risk management plan](#).

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

Main findings

The service has strong governance and scrutiny arrangements in place

The Cheshire [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 effective strategic oversight arrangements in place to manage financial and resourcing risks, performance and improvement plans. It has effective processes and controls and strong internal governance arrangements in place to manage strategic risks. For example, the performance and programme board, which the deputy chief fire officer chairs, covers performance, programmes and projects. The people board covers service culture, attendance, staffing levels and training. The service also has a budget management board and weekly senior leadership team meetings, which the finance team attends. Senior leaders can also monitor performance daily through the service's performance dashboard.

The service reports accurate and suitably detailed financial, risk and performance information to the fire and rescue authority. It frequently reports performance against key performance indicators to the fire and rescue authority and its subgroups, including its performance and overview committee and audit committee.

We found that the service's external and internal audit reports were thorough, and we saw evidence of effective scrutiny by committees.

The [scheme of delegation](#) clearly sets out responsibilities for the service's senior leaders. There are effective internal governance arrangements in place to hold senior leaders to account for the corporate management of the service. We found evidence that senior leaders were appropriately challenged on performance and that they took corrective action to address underperformance. We also found that senior leaders were held to account through personal development reviews. And the reviews that we saw had objectives that were clearly linked to the [community risk management plan \(CRMP\)](#).

The chief fire officer has operational independence and the autonomy to make operational decisions.

The service's work patterns make sure its workforce is productive

The service's financial and workforce plans, including allocating resources to prevention, protection and response, are consistent with the risks and priorities it has identified in its CRMP. Since [our 2023 inspection](#), the service has completed a prevention department review. The prevention team now has the resources to achieve CRMP objectives, including a newly established persons-at-heightened-risk team to work with the most [vulnerable people](#).

The service has increased the number of fire safety inspectors through effective recruitment and retention work. This makes sure that it has enough resources to implement its protection strategy.

The service has sustainable plans in place to resource its protection function if protection grant funding is reduced or withdrawn. It has used the protection grant to fund several areas. These include pay supplements for protection staff, measures to improve staff retention, additional business safety advocates, training, risk-based inspection data cleansing and personal security devices for staff. The service told us that it planned to continue staff pay supplements if the funding was reduced or withdrawn.

The service has evaluated its mix of crewing and duty systems. It has analysed its response cover and can show that it deploys its fire engines and response staff to manage risk efficiently. It has carried out a fire cover review since our 2023 inspection. This resulted in introducing of an additional duty system, weekday crewing. Weekday crewing means that fire engines are staffed by wholetime firefighters Monday to Friday. The service uses these fire engines to provide fire cover in on-call areas that have low availability of fire engines. This has led to improved firefighter productivity through an increase in prevention, protection and response activity, with a minimal increase in costs.

The service is taking steps to increase the availability of its on-call crews. Despite introducing a weekday crewing duty system to cover on-call areas, it is committed to improving on-call availability. Where possible, the service uses wholetime firefighters to fill gaps in on-call staffing, which increases fire engine availability. And support staff who are also on-call firefighters can work nearer their stations to help with on-call availability while carrying out their primary role.

The service has introduced rapid response units at all primary on-call stations. These allow incidents such as road traffic collisions to be attended by a minimum of two firefighters where appropriate, instead of a minimum of four on a standard fire engine.

In some cases, the service has also increased the time on-call firefighters have to travel to their station and respond to an emergency call. This allows people outside the traditional five-minute travel time limit to become on-call firefighters.

During our 2023 inspection, we found that the service was reliant on high levels of prearranged overtime to fill gaps in staffing. During this inspection we found that the service's prearranged overtime per head of workforce decreased from £1,232 during 2021/22 to £599 during 2024/25. This was lower than the England rate of £742.

The service has good financial management processes in place

In 2025/26, the service's net revenue budget was £59.23 million. The net revenue budget for 2024/25 was adjusted for inflation from £56.07 million to £57.35 million. This means that between 2024/25 and 2025/26, the budget increased by 3.3 percent in real terms. The 2025/26 budget was funded by £38.4 million from council tax, £2.7 million from business rates and £18.13 million from revenue support and other grants. The service's total funding was £59.23 million, which was £51.96 per head of its population. This was within the typical range compared to all services in England.

The service has a sound understanding of its future financial challenges. At the time of our inspection, the service was considering how the government's Fair Funding Review may affect it.

The service plans to mitigate its main financial risks, which include the funding of its capital programme, staff shortages in its finance department, the potential costs of a new [mobilisation](#) system and potential changes in governance. These are all included in the service's corporate risk register alongside control measures to reduce the risk.

The service's planning assumptions are relatively robust and realistic. They take account of the wider external environment and some scenario planning for future spending reductions. As part of its financial planning, the service presents three scenarios, which are the reasonable worst, reasonable best and most likely case scenarios.

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. External auditors have provided assurance that there are no significant weaknesses within the service's internal controls on spending.

The service's capital programme is set at £26.3 million, which covers 2025/26 to 2027/28. This ambitious capital programme is funded through capital reserves, capital receipts and borrowing. Despite rising building costs and uncertainty over revenue funding, the service shows a clear commitment to getting value for money, refurbishing and modernising existing fire stations to a high standard and investing in energy-saving measures.

Capital financing costs are 3.3 percent of the net revenue budget. They are set to increase by 4.2 percent by 2027/28 under existing capital plans.

By 2027/28, the service has forecasted debt and reserves to be 51.0 percent and 11.0 percent, respectively, of the net revenue budget. This compares to forecasted levels of 41.1 percent and 14.0 percent, respectively, for 2025/26. This shows that the service expects debt levels to increase and reserve levels to decrease over the period of its medium-term financial plan.

The service has a sensible and sustainable plan for using its reserves. This plan includes details of the reserves held, their intended use and the strategy for making sure that they are maintained at an appropriate level.

The service has an effective performance management process in place

The service's arrangements for managing performance clearly link resource use to its CRMP and its strategic priorities. It has a robust performance management structure in place that monitors performance against a set of key performance indicators linked to its CRMP. These include the number of safe and well visits carried out, the number of fires attended and fire engine availability. Performance is reported to senior leaders and fire and rescue authority members through the service's performance and overview committee.

The service uses data to improve staff productivity, make sure resources are used efficiently and effectively and provide value for money. Its data-informed approach has supported decision-making about changes to duty systems, its new response standard and aligning its capacity and capability with its strategic priorities.

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. For example, it has used a productivity calculator to identify additional capacity and adjust targets. The service has a station management framework that details firefighters' work routines and expected outputs. These are frequently audited by managers.

Fire false alarms are incidents where the service attends a location but on arrival, discovers that no resources are required to resolve the incident or that no incident occurred. In the year ending 30 June 2025, 42.0 percent of incidents attended in Cheshire were fire false alarms. The rate of attendance at incidents that were fire false alarms was 3.3 per 1,000 population. This was lower than the England rate of 4.3. However, the service has seen an increase in its attendance at fire false alarms since 2022. In the year ending 30 June 2022, the rate was 2.9.

The service has a risk-based system in place to manage its response to unwanted fire signals. In the year ending 31 March 2025, 29.5 percent (5,876 of 19,912) of emergency calls to the service were automatic fire alarms. Of these, 79.4 percent weren't attended, which was higher than the England average of 44.6 for the same period.

The service uses its call-challenging policy to effectively minimise unnecessary mobilisations to automatic fire alarms. However, it is aware that the number of fire false alarm incidents it attends is increasing. It told us that it was working with community partners to reduce these attendances.

The service is taking steps to make sure its workforce is as productive as possible. This includes putting in place new ways of working. For example, at the time of our inspection, its recently introduced weekday crewing duty system had increased efficiency. This means that when firefighters aren't responding to emergency incidents, they can use their time to carry out more safe and well and fire safety visits and gather risk information through site-specific risk inspections.

The service met its target for its planned savings, but there is scope to improve benefits monitoring and benchmarking

In the year 2024/25, the service's expenditure was £54.64 million, which was £47.94 per head of its population. This was within the typical range compared to all services in England.

There are regular reviews to consider all the service's expenditure, including its non-pay costs. This scrutiny makes sure that the service gets value for money. For example, it commissioned an independent budget review of a project to modernise Wilmslow Fire Station to assess value for money. The report concluded that the prices quoted were broadly in line with market expectations and represented good value for money. The service also uses well-established procurement frameworks to make sure that it gets value for money.

The service consistently achieves the savings identified in its financial and efficiency plans. Between 2022/23 and 2024/25, it made savings of £2.66 million, exceeding its planned target of £690,000. In 2025/26, it made savings by using a utilities broker and reduced average costs by using an insurance consortium.

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. For example, the service is committed to refurbishing and modernising its buildings to a high standard and investing in energy-saving measures. It is replacing most of its fleet of support vehicles with hybrid and full-electric models, with many diesel vehicles being phased out. This not only cuts fuel costs but reduces the negative effect on the environment.

The service monitors and reviews some of the benefits and results of its contract arrangements, collaborations and improvement projects. For example, it has installed solar panels at many of its stations and is monitoring the benefits of this project, including utility costs, before and after the panels were fitted.

While the service reviews the benefits of a project once it has been completed, it hasn't yet established a process to make sure that the expected benefits are achieved. We found that the service's benefit register lacked detail. There were very few financial and performance measures and targets recorded, which would show if benefits had been achieved. While several of the projects were listed as having achieved the expected benefits, these benefits weren't recorded on the register. The service needs a more comprehensive benefits register to make sure that expected outcomes are being achieved.

We also found little evidence that [benchmarking](#) was taking place. The service would benefit from participating in the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#)'s financial benchmarking work. By comparing itself with other services, it would be able to identify whether any areas of its expenditure are above average and if it needs to review them to provide better value for money.

Through its approach to value for money, the service has identified and achieved efficiencies that have improved its services to the public. For example, the service shares the North West Fire Control centre with three other fire and rescue services. This has resulted in sizable savings and improved resilience.

The service continues to review the efficiency and effectiveness of the remaining corporate services that it shares with Cheshire Constabulary. These include stores, estates, procurement and legal services. At the time of our inspection, the service was planning to bring some of these back in-house in late 2026. However, it hadn't made a decision about legal services.

The service's estate and fleet strategies align with its CRMP

The service's capital programme and estate and fleet strategies have clear links to its CRMP. For example, it plans to complete the modernisation of its fire stations, invest in a new mobilisation system and continue to invest in electric vehicles and charging facilities. Both strategies exploit opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness. For example, the service shares a number of sites with Cheshire Constabulary.

The service regularly reviews these strategies so that it can properly assess the effect any changes in estate and fleet provision, or future innovation, have on risk. It completes estate and fleet projects on time and within budget and manages risks appropriately. However, the service has altered plans in some areas due to increased costs. These include increased costs for the rebuilding of Warrington and Ellesmere Port fire stations. It has assessed these risks and made changes to its plans. As a result, these stations will now be refurbished instead of rebuilt.

The service is bringing IT back in-house to improve alignment with its priorities

The service doesn't have an IT strategy. At the time of our inspection, IT was part of the blue light collaboration arrangements (joint working with other emergency services) and was largely led by Cheshire Constabulary.

The service actively considers how changes in technology and future innovation may affect risk. It has a dedicated IT security team as part of the blue light collaboration. Its IT systems are tiered to improve resilience. Its critical systems have backup systems in different locations. One example includes the deployment of fire engines, which can be done over a 4G connection if the primary connection is lost.

The service also aims to exploit opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness presented by changes in technology. Prevention and protection staff use 5G-enabled tablets, which allows them to work while on the move and from different locations. The [control room](#) has access to an IT system that allows staff to see live images of an incident through the 999 caller's smartphone. This helps to inform mobilising decisions. The service plans to use artificial intelligence. It is assessing where the technology can be best used in the future.

We found that the service didn't consistently carry out IT projects on time and within budget. Staff told us that IT was an issue in some areas and a barrier to service improvement. As a result, the service has decided to bring its IT function back in-house. We look forward to seeing the results of this during our next inspection.

The service effectively manages change

The service has put in place the capacity and capability it needs to achieve sustainable change. At the time of our inspection, the service had 36 live projects. These included:

- breathing apparatus replacement;
- a finance IT system;
- the relocation of storage facilities;
- an applicant tracking system;
- a command support unit; and
- [mobile data terminals](#).

The service manages change through effective projects and programmes. It has a clear internal structure with appropriate governance arrangements to make sure that progress against projects and programmes is monitored, scrutinised and challenged. It has established a project for every CRMP objective. Project delivery is tracked through the service's 'Cheshire planning system'. The service provides regular updates to the performance and programme board and performance and overview committee for further scrutiny.

Promoting, embedding and improving values and culture

Good

Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service is good 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.

Innovative practice

The service effectively works with staff to improve culture

The service works with its staff to improve culture through its 'culture conversations' workshops, which the chief fire officer leads. This allows the service to recognise its cultural strengths as well as identify areas for improvement. The group is presented with real-life examples of situations that have occurred either in the service or elsewhere. They then discuss what actions they would have taken in each situation. Attendees are required to promise to carry out three specific actions to improve the service's culture in future. The staff we spoke to were very positive about the initiative.

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

Main findings

The service is committed to improving culture, behaviours and values in the workplace

The service continues to have well-defined values, which staff understand. We found that staff at all levels of the service showed behaviours that reflected service values. Staff told us that the chief fire officer has had a positive influence on service culture.

The service has implemented the [Core Code of Ethics](#) well, staff understand it and it is integrated within policies and procedures. The service has incorporated the Core Code of Ethics into its core values and code of conduct for employees.

The service's core values are:

- being inclusive;
- doing the right thing;
- acting with compassion; and
- making a difference.

In our workforce survey, 80 percent of respondents (185 of 232) agreed that senior leaders consistently modelled and maintained the service's values. During our inspection, many of the staff we spoke to told us that senior leaders led by example and challenged those who didn't model the service's values.

The service continues to be compliant with [safeguarding](#) legislation by completing appropriate background checks for all existing members of staff. All members of staff are required to have a standard background check as a minimum. Staff that are likely to have regular contact with [children](#) or [vulnerable adults](#) are required to have an enhanced background check. Background checks are renewed every three years. In the year ending 31 March 2025, 99.4 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 starters who needed a background check had one.

The service has effective oversight and scrutiny arrangements in place

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 examples of the service adjusting policies and procedures as a direct result of the scrutiny that had taken place. For example, changes were made to the service's trade union protocol after a member of staff raised a grievance over taking time off to carry out trade union duties.

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. Senior leaders provide regular updates on discipline and grievance cases to members of the fire and rescue authority through the authority's staffing committee. The service's newly established professional standards board monitors trends and the outcome of disciplinary procedures and concerns raised by staff anonymously through the service's independent third-party reporting line.

Some staff lack confidence that the service will act on feedback

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. Some, but not all, trade union representatives are involved in the service's health and safety committee. At the time of our inspection, the [Fire Brigades Union](#)'s branch chair and secretary roles were vacant. This meant that the service's liaison with trade union representatives at a senior level was limited.

In our workforce survey, 71 percent of respondents (165 of 232) agreed that they felt confident in the processes for providing feedback to all levels of leadership. Most staff told us that they felt confident about providing feedback to leaders verbally or through official feedback processes. However, some staff told us that senior leaders weren't visible and were rarely seen at fire stations.

The service gathers feedback through staff surveys every two years. The results of staff surveys are shared with staff through service newsletters.

Individual members of staff, representative bodies and staff network groups that we spoke to gave examples of where they had raised legitimate concerns with leaders. The service had been active in resolving them.

In our workforce survey, 60 percent of respondents (140 of 232) agreed that they were confident their feedback would be acted on. While some staff provided examples of changes that had happened as a result of their feedback, others lacked confidence that their feedback would be acted on or that their questions would be answered.

Staff are comfortable with challenging unacceptable behaviour

There is a positive working culture throughout the service, and staff feel empowered and willing to challenge unacceptable behaviours when they come across them.

In our workforce survey, 78 percent of respondents (181 of 232) agreed that they felt safe to challenge unacceptable behaviour in their service. Most staff that we spoke to told us that they felt comfortable directly challenging the person involved or raising their concerns with their line manager.

Staff have a good understanding of what bullying, [harassment](#) and discrimination are and their negative effects on colleagues and the culture of the organisation.

During our inspection, most staff that we spoke to told us that they hadn't experienced bullying, harassment or discrimination at work. However, in our workforce survey, 10 percent of respondents (23 of 232) told us that they had felt bullied or harassed by members of their service in the past 12 months. And 11 percent of respondents (25 of 232) 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). The grievance cases we assessed were consistent and contained sufficient detail, with appropriate and clearly rationalised outcomes. However, some of the cases we viewed could have been more thorough. For example, the service should give greater consideration to informing the police where staff involved in grievance cases may have broken the law. It should also consider suspending staff or moving them to other roles during ongoing investigations to reduce the risks to others.

As at 31 March 2025, there were three live grievances and eight disciplinary cases. Of these disciplinary cases, six 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. Discipline panels are independent, and members are trained to provide a fair, unbiased outcome. Trade union representatives told us that they felt misconduct issues were dealt with quickly and appropriately.

As at 31 March 2025, the average length of time a grievance case had been open was 45 days. This was below the England average of 93 days. However, for the same period, the average length of time a discipline case had been open was 163 days. This was above the England average of 111 days.

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 spoke 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.

The service can show that it is adapting its processes and sharing with staff the learning it has gained from dealing with grievance and discipline cases.

The service has good well-being provisions in place and prioritises both mental and physical health

The service has effective and well-understood health and safety policies and procedures in place. These policies and procedures are readily available, and leaders at all levels promote them effectively to all staff.

Stakeholders, including trade union representatives, are members of the service's health, safety and welfare committee, which meets quarterly and has representatives from across the service.

The service makes sure that firefighters are fit enough to carry out their roles safely through annual fitness testing. It uses fitness advisors to provide health and fitness guidance to those who don't meet the required standard.

The service effectively controls firefighters' exposure to harmful contaminants. It has designated stores for contaminated personal protective equipment and signage on doors clearly that identify clean and dirty zones. We found that staff compliance was managed locally by line managers.

In our workforce survey, 95 percent of respondents (221 of 232) agreed that they knew how to access support for their mental health through their service. The service's intranet has a dedicated support section called 'my wellbeing'. This resource provides signposting to all areas of well-being support, including [trauma risk management \(TRiM\)](#).

As at 31 March 2025, 11.9 percent of [wholetime](#) firefighters had registered secondary employment and 13.7 percent had a dual contract with the same fire and rescue service. The service has effective secondary employment policies in place. It monitors staff who have secondary employment or dual contracts to make sure they comply with the secondary employment policy and don't work excessive hours. The service's policy clearly states that it is the staff member's responsibility to inform the service of any changes to their secondary employment status.

Working hours and rest periods are clearly defined. Staff are required to submit working hours every month. Line managers are responsible for monitoring working hours, with additional, service-wide scrutiny provided by the service's working time regulations monitoring group. However, the service acknowledges that this is reliant on staff accurately submitting their working hours. Some staff told us that despite the policy, the service didn't enforce restrictions on working hours.

The service also continues to have well-understood and effective well-being policies in place, which are available to staff. A significant range of well-being support is available to support both physical and mental health. For example, post-traumatic incident support is provided through TRiM. However, some staff told us that the TRiM offer was inconsistent.

The service is proactive in building resilience among staff, and we found examples of where it had intervened to support a staff member's needs. Individual needs are identified through stress risk assessments, which are completed as part of the staff appraisal process. Managers receive training in personal resilience, suicide prevention and mental health first aid.

There are good provisions in place to promote staff well-being. There are gyms in all the service's fire stations, which can be used by all staff members. The service has two fitness advisors who work with staff and provide advice and guidance. It also has mental health advisors, mental health first aiders and TRiM practitioners. It holds mental health days and can also provide mental health advice and support through its [occupational health unit](#). The service has access to four well-being and trauma-support dogs.

In our workforce survey, 70 percent of respondents (163 of 232) agreed that service leaders treated their well-being as a priority. Most staff reported that they understood and had confidence in the well-being support processes available.

Despite a decrease in long- and short-term sickness absence in 2023/24, it rose in 2024/25. In 2024/25, an average of 3.7 days/shifts were lost due to firefighters being on long-term sickness leave, compared with 3.0 in the previous year. During the same period, an average of 3.0 days/shifts were lost by firefighters on short-term sickness leave, compared with 2.8 in the previous year. The service needs to effectively deal with both short and long-term sickness.

Training and developing the right people with the right skills

Good

Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service is good 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 \(CRMP\)](#). 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.

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 workforce planning continues to make sure that the required skills and capabilities are available

The service has good workforce planning in place. This makes sure that skills and capabilities align with what it needs to effectively carry out its community risk management plan. Through its workforce planning process, the service uses a detailed workforce plan to monitor headcount, recruitment timing, attrition and retirement profiles. The senior leadership team receives quarterly workforce planning updates, which include profiles of those who have left the service and retirement projections. These updates are also provided to the operational learning board to inform training plans for the following year. These plans include courses for new recruits and specialist skills training.

Workforce and succession planning is consistently scrutinised through regular meetings to discuss requirements. The service has an establishment team that plans recruitment and promotional processes using a strategic workforce planning tool. Monthly establishment meetings are held to make sure that business needs are met by matching recruitment to operational requirements. The retirement details of managers of all levels are shared with the senior leadership team through a quarterly workforce planning report. This allows promotion processes to be planned and timely.

Workforce planning is also carried out for support staff roles. An annual review, which includes information on future skills gaps and staff turnover, is presented to the people board.

The service makes sure that staff have the skills and capabilities to effectively carry out their roles

Most staff told us that they could access the training they needed to be effective in their roles. In our workforce survey, 86 percent of respondents (199 of 232) agreed that their service gave them the necessary training to carry out their roles. The service effectively makes sure that all role-specific mandatory e-learning and practical training is completed.

Training isn't just focused on operational skills. It also includes management skills. The service's training plans make sure that staff can maintain competence and capability effectively. For example, managers are provided with a range of management training, including recruitment and selection, performance management, discipline and grievances, equality, diversity and inclusion and communication and engagement training.

In our workforce survey, 90 percent of respondents (208 of 232) agreed that they could access relevant learning and development opportunities. Staff can request additional training through the professional development review process. Staff have access to a range of training and development opportunities, which are provided both internally and externally. Additional training is advertised through the service's weekly newsletter, 'The Green'.

The service monitors staff competence through an electronic recording system that records areas including incident command validation, command hours, driving logs, training course dates and mandatory training. Support staff use a similar system to record their competencies. The service regularly updates its understanding of staff skills and risk-critical safety capabilities by effectively monitoring skills gaps through quarterly workforce planning reviews. This approach 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 its current and future needs.

The service promotes a culture of learning and development

The service promotes a culture of continuous improvement throughout the organisation, and it encourages staff to learn and develop. For example, it offers its 'step into leadership' programme to staff who want to progress into management roles or have been newly promoted into management roles. The programme is available to both operational and support staff.

We were pleased to find that the service had a range of easily accessible learning and development resources. These included e-learning packages and practical training in areas such as breathing apparatus, road traffic collisions, rope rescue and incident command. This helps staff to do their jobs effectively.

The service has identified parts of its training and development provision that some staff have found difficult to access or use. We are pleased to find that the service had taken proactive steps to remove these barriers. It continues to improve its career directory for support staff, which is called 'Wider Horizons'. This provides details of learning, development and career opportunities available to non-operational staff. The service supports staff who want to move into different roles or apply for promotions. Staff can also access support from a leadership development advisor.

Ensuring fairness and diversity

Good

Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service is good 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.

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

Main findings

The service needs to do more to increase staff diversity

As part of this inspection, we reviewed a range of recent recruitment campaigns for firefighters, supervisors and senior leaders.

We found that the service had an open, fair and honest recruitment process for existing staff or those wishing to work for it. There is an effective system to understand and remove the risk of [disproportionality](#) in recruitment processes. For example, the service uses [equality impact assessments](#) to eliminate disproportionality in its recruitment processes. It has a dedicated attraction and recruitment working group. The group identifies potential barriers to recruitment and ways of addressing them, and its actions are managed through the service's people board.

Job adverts include job descriptions, people specifications and a guide on how to complete the application form. The service offers reasonable adjustments where needed.

The service doesn't have an effective applicant tracker process or system. This makes it difficult to monitor where applicants are dropping out of the recruitment process and to identify trends. As a result, it is difficult for the service to know where to make improvements to its recruitment process.

The service has put considerable effort into developing its recruitment policies so that they are fair and applicants can understand them. All the recruitment files we sampled showed clear evidence of a fair and transparent blind-sifting process, which included individual application scoring. Interview scoring sheets were completed by members of the recruitment panel individually and then brought together for moderation by the group. All panel members are required to complete [unconscious bias](#) training.

The service's recruitment processes are comprehensive and cover opportunities in all roles. The service advertises recruitment opportunities internally and externally. Its website provides details of career opportunities, which include [on-call](#), support staff and volunteer roles, along with details of its [positive action](#) policies. It also advertises jobs through the Asian Fire Service Association, Women in the Fire Service, the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#), recruitment agencies and social media platforms.

The service's ethnic minority staff network, REACH, is involved in positive action campaigns and projects to promote recruitment opportunities through community events. This includes providing additional information to people from ethnic minority groups who might not usually consider a career in the fire and rescue service. Members of the network told the service that the swimming requirement in its application process was a barrier to people in certain communities. The service has since removed this requirement, which has encouraged more applicants from diverse backgrounds, including those applying for middle management and senior leadership roles.

However, the service still needs to do more to increase staff diversity. We found that it had made little progress to improve ethnic and gender diversity.

In 2024/25, 3 out of 83 new joiners (where ethnicity was known) were from an ethnic minority background.

As at 31 March 2025, 2.8 percent (23) of the service's staff were from an ethnic minority background compared to 5.2 percent in the local population and 6.4 percent throughout all fire and rescue services in England. However, 1.7 percent of staff hadn't stated their ethnicity.

For the same period, 26.4 percent of the service's staff were women compared to an average of 20.8 percent throughout all fire and rescue services.

The proportion of firefighters from an ethnic minority background remained the same at 3.1 percent (19 people) between as at 31 March 2025.

The proportion of women firefighters remained the same at 12.5 percent (77 women) over the same period.

The service effectively identifies and addresses barriers to career progression

We found positive examples of where the service had identified and addressed barriers that disproportionately prevented people from particular groups from progressing. For example, it identified barriers to firefighters applying for leadership roles.

The service told us that women firefighters waited an average of 13 years from when they joined the service to apply for leadership roles. The service has worked to remove this barrier through the introduction of its Elev8 leadership programme. The programme offers staff access to classroom-based learning, reverse mentoring (where junior members of staff mentor more senior members), senior leadership team shadowing and secondments across the service. It aims to educate staff and give them the confidence to apply for leadership roles sooner. The programme has been successful and has resulted in more diversity in supervisory and middle manager roles.

Each staff member has individual goals and objectives and regular performance appraisals. Staff appraisals include objectives that are clearly linked to the service's [community risk management plan](#). Staff feel confident in the performance and development arrangements in place. As at 31 March 2025, 92.9 percent of [wholetime](#) firefighters, 84.0 percent of support staff and 93.8 percent of on-call firefighters completed a performance appraisal.

The service's promotion and progression processes are comprehensive and cover all roles.

The service has effective succession-planning processes in place. These allow it to effectively manage the career pathways of its staff, including those in roles that require specialist skills.

Equality, diversity and inclusion is a service priority

The service considers EDI to be a strategic priority. It makes sure that it can offer the right services to its communities and support staff with [protected characteristics](#). For example, the service recognises its obligations under the [Equality Act 2010](#) and specifically the [public sector equality duty](#). Staff diversity data is collected and monitored through quarterly meetings of the EDI steering group. Staff have good awareness of EDI policies and are required to complete mandatory EDI training.

During this inspection, we reviewed a range of policies, strategies and project documents that affected different parts of the service. These included its uniform policy, safe and well policy and fire station modernisation projects. We found that equality impact assessments had been completed in all instances.

The service has an effective process in place to assess equality impact. It provides staff with equality impact assessment templates, guides and toolkits. The EDI team offers support to make sure that assessments are completed thoroughly. The service uses the National Fire Chiefs Council's equality impact assessment template. This includes all protected characteristics, plus additional socioeconomic factors. The service has robust EDI governance in place. Where equality impact assessments identify a negative impact on a specific group, it is reported to the EDI steering group. The service acts as needed to improve equality.

The service has developed several ways to work with staff on issues relating to EDI that affect them. These include methods to build all-staff awareness of fairness and diversity and targeted initiatives to identify matters that affect different staff groups. The service works with a diverse range of staff through its five staff networks. These are:

- Firepride (the LGBTQ+ staff and volunteer network);
- Limitless (the women's network);
- REACH (the race, equality and cultural heritage network);
- Divergence (the neurodivergence network); and
- Armed forces (aligned with the Armed Forces Covenant).

Each staff network has a senior leadership team sponsor. The chairs of each network are invited to attend meetings of the service's EDI steering group.

In our workforce survey, 88 percent of respondents (203 of 232) agreed that they felt comfortable being themselves at work. And 94 percent of respondents (217 of 232) agreed that they had access to gender-appropriate workplace facilities.

The service has acted to address matters that staff have raised. This has included making changes to promotion interviews. Concerns were raised that neurodivergent staff may be disadvantaged by the conventional interview process. As a result, the service now provides all candidates with the questions in writing 30 minutes before their interview. Staff have reacted positively to these changes. Representative bodies and staff associations told us that the service worked with them well on EDI issues.

Leading people effectively

Outstanding

Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service is outstanding 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 \(CRMP\)](#) 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.

Promising practice

The service proactively removes barriers to promotion and supports staff in accessing leadership development opportunities

At the time of our inspection, the service had recently introduced its Elev8 leadership programme in response to feedback from operational staff.

This programme is designed to address the reasons why some staff are reluctant to take the next steps in their careers. It aims to remove barriers to promotion and boost staff confidence. The programme has been proven to support and accelerate career progression while improving diversity at supervisory and middle manager levels.

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

Main findings

Senior leaders effectively communicate with staff

Senior leaders are effectively communicating the aims and objectives in the CRMP to staff at all levels. They are doing this in a variety of ways, which promotes open, two-way communication. The service uses several methods to communicate with staff, including its weekly newsletter 'The Green', the 'News Hub' publication and its quarterly 'Alert' magazine. As a result of staff feedback, 'Alert' magazine is now available in print and digital versions. Staff can access an intranet page called 'we're listening', which allows them to keep up to date with service news. Senior leaders carry out what are known as 'back to the floor' visits, which involve them spending the day with a team. For example, the chief fire officer spent the day with the persons-at-heightened-risk team and carried out prevention activity. The chief fire officer and other senior leaders provide 'Cheshire Fire Live' sessions, during which they answer, via a live video feed, questions that staff have submitted before the sessions. We found that this approach was supported by leaders at all levels who made sure that staff understood the aims and objectives.

As a result, staff have a high level of trust in their leaders. In our workforce survey, 81 percent of respondents (188 of 232) agreed that senior leaders clearly communicated the service's objectives. The staff that we spoke to also agreed with this. They understood how they contributed to the aims of the CRMP individually and as a team.

The service has further improved how it develops leadership and high-potential staff at all levels

We found that the service had well-understood arrangements in place to identify talented leaders. It has effective succession-planning processes in place. These allow it to effectively manage the career pathways of its staff, including roles that need specialist skills.

Staff clearly understand and trust career development pathways. And the service proactively removes any barriers and supports all staff in accessing leadership development opportunities, which we have identified as an example of promising practice.

There are talent management schemes in place to develop leaders and high-potential staff. These include the 'step into' leadership programme for new and aspiring leaders, the 'step up' development programme for supervisory leaders and an executive leadership programme for senior leaders.

The service advertises all talent and leadership opportunities fairly. Staff can request to be enrolled on development and leadership programmes through the staff appraisal process.

The service has put considerable effort into developing its promotion and progression processes so that they are fair and all staff understand them. Its promotion and progression policies are comprehensive and cover the opportunities available to all operational staff, but they offer limited guidance for staff in support roles. In our workforce survey, only 58 percent of respondents (135 of 232) agreed that the promotion process in the service was fair. Some staff told us about issues, which included candidates receiving incorrect updates on the progress of their applications and a lack of timely feedback. Staff told us that this had affected their confidence in the promotion processes. The service acknowledges this and has made changes for future promotion processes. However, most of the staff we spoke to felt that the service's promotion processes were fair.

The service manages selection processes consistently. All interview panel members complete [unconscious bias](#) training. Interview scoring sheets are completed by members of the recruitment panel individually and then brought together for moderation by the group to guarantee consistency.

The service uses temporary promotions 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 333 days, which was higher than the England average of 295 days. As at 31 March 2025, the longest temporary promotion was 1,917 days, which was higher than the England average of 1,256 days.

Leaders are well equipped to lead

We found that the service had leaders in place who were well equipped to lead.

The service continues to have a good process in place for leaders to manage performance and development. Staff have specific and individual objectives or have had their performance assessed in the past year. In our workforce survey, 78 percent of respondents (182 of 232) agreed that the service's performance management systems allowed them to achieve their potential.

Leaders at all levels have received appropriate training, which helps them to confidently manage a range of challenges. This includes training in unconscious bias, recruitment and selection, absence management and difficult conversations.

The service has coaching and mentoring programmes in place to develop leaders. Leaders are exposed to different management scenarios that match and stretch their skills. The service has a register of mentors and coaches for staff to choose from. It also provides reverse mentoring (where junior members of staff mentor more senior members) through some of its leadership programmes such as Elev8. This means that the service has leaders who are confident to step up to the next level of management when opportunities arise.

At the time of our inspection, all leaders had recently completed 360-degree feedback (multi-person, anonymous feedback) to identify their strengths, weaknesses and areas for development. This allows them to adapt their behaviours and leadership style based on constructive feedback.

Senior leaders effectively manage staff performance

Leaders are equipped to confidently manage staff performance and deal with any poor performance or behavioural issues. They receive training on how to effectively deal with poor performance, which includes training on how to manage difficult conversations.

There is a good performance management system in place, which allows leaders to effectively develop and assess the individual performance of all staff members. For example, managers set individual performance objectives as part of the performance development review process. These objectives are clearly linked to the aims of the CRMP. Team performance is monitored against key performance indicators and discussed during regular team meetings. Staff told us that they had confidence in the performance and development arrangements in place.

Senior leaders are committed to improving culture, behaviours and values in the workplace

Leaders at all levels act as role models. For example, most of the staff we spoke to told us that senior leaders were visible and approachable and consistently displayed the service's values.

In our workforce survey, 76 percent of respondents (176 of 232) agreed that leaders at all levels promoted a positive culture. Staff are empowered and willing to challenge poor behaviours when they come across them.

As a result, leaders are maintaining and constantly developing the positive culture we found throughout the organisation. The service is providing a series of interactive sessions called 'culture conversations' to all staff members. The sessions are led by the chief fire officer and include discussions on culture, values, challenging inappropriate behaviour and encouraging openness. The staff we spoke to were very positive about the sessions.

Leaders are active in challenging [misconduct](#), including bullying, [harassment](#) and discrimination. And staff trust them to take their concerns seriously. Staff gave us examples of where senior leaders had dealt with inappropriate behaviour swiftly and appropriately.

