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

Fire and rescue services 2025–27

Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service

Contents

Overall summary

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

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

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 Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service in June 2023. And in November 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 Northumberland 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

I have concerns about the performance of Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service in keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks. I have serious concerns about the service's standards for response, values and culture, training and skills, and equality and diversity.

On 28 April 2026, I published an accelerated cause of concern as I consider the risk identified to pose a potential risk to public safety:

- The service doesn't effectively gather and record or manage its site-specific risk information to protect firefighters and the public.

We issued recommendations for the service to review and implement.

I am disappointed that, as a result of our inspection, I have four further causes of concern.

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

I have concerns about the culture of the organisation. The service has been through a period of organisational instability. This included a restructure of staff and governance models and new appointments in its senior leadership team. I recognise the effect such events can have on staff who are continuing to support service provision. I praise them for their resilience during this time. But the service still has work to do. We found that the service didn't have embedded values for its staff. Some behaviours within the service were unacceptable, such as the inappropriate language used in some areas. Worryingly, some staff weren't confident about reporting these issues because of a lack of trust in all levels of management and inconsistencies in how the service deals with issues.

I have concerns about the service's ability to appropriately record and monitor operational competencies. The service installed new software, but this didn't initially include enough elements to fully record operational competence. This means the service's approach to collecting and monitoring such information has been inconsistent. The service can't be sure all staff have the required competencies to meet the expected standard.

I am concerned that the service's commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion has deteriorated since our last inspection. In my last report, I commented on the progress the service had made in this area. It is disappointing that the service has removed support and strategic leadership in this area. The service needs to improve its understanding of equality impacts and take appropriate action. This will help the service when making decisions that affect policy.

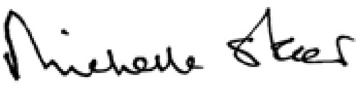
The service hasn't made enough progress in areas such as:

- implementing the recommendations from the Grenfell Tower Inquiry and Manchester Arena Inquiry;
- closing the areas for improvement we issued in our 2023–25 report; and
- aligning its policies and procedures with national operational guidance.

In response to the accelerated cause of concern, the service has provided us with an action plan that details how it intends to address the associated recommendations.

This report focuses on our findings during our inspection, which took place over seven weeks from 2 February 2026.

We will revisit the service to review its progress in addressing the accelerated cause of concern and its associated recommendations.



Michelle Skeer OBE QPM

His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies

Requires improvement

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement 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.

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure it understands, records and monitors any risks that prevent it from implementing the priorities outlined in its community risk management plan.

The service should make sure it has effective arrangements to manage and monitor performance against the priorities set out in its community risk management plan at a strategic level.

The service should make sure its community risk management plan is informed by a comprehensive understanding of current and future risk. It should use a range of data to build the risk profile and use operational data to test that this risk profile is up to date.

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 should do more to make sure the risk information it uses to support its community risk management plan is accurate and up to date

The service assessed a suitable range of risks and threats for its community risk management plan (CRMP) for 2022–26, called the '[Community Risk Management Plan 2022–2026 – Making Northumberland Safer]'. In its assessment of risk, it used information it collected from a range of internal and external sources and datasets, taking account of both local and national risk registers.

As part of the preparation for publishing the CRMP 2022–26, the service produced a community risk profile. This includes data to support its understanding of previous incidents, population and demographics along with the likelihood of incidents.

But the service told us it hadn't refreshed all this data to inform its new CRMP 2026–30. It can't be sure its understanding of risk is accurate and up to date, or that the work that has taken place has reduced or mitigated risk.

The service should make more progress against the objectives in the CRMP

The service records its findings about community risk in an easily understood CRMP 2022–26. 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. These objectives inform the service's operating plans. The staff responsible for implementing them at a tactical level understand them.

But the service hasn't fully evaluated its performance against the objectives set out in the CRMP 2022–26. This would help it understand what is effective in reducing risk and help it build a more comprehensive risk profile in the CRMP 2026–30.

At the time of our inspection, the service had implemented a new corporate risk register to identify and monitor service-wide risks. It is unclear how the service monitored or scrutinised risk at a strategic level before this was implemented.

The new register doesn't have enough detail on actions and outcomes. It is also not clear what accountability is in place to make sure any actions are effective. For example, the register has minimal information about progress against the areas for improvement from our last inspection. There is no strategic oversight to hold people accountable for outstanding actions.

It isn't clear whether the governance structure supports scrutiny or challenge so that risks are mitigated effectively and actions are timely and appropriate. The service should make sure it understands, records and monitors any risks that prevent it from implementing the priorities outlined in its CRMP.

The service could do more to monitor how it is implementing its main objectives

Senior leaders don't have effective monitoring, feedback and scrutiny arrangements to make sure the CRMP's objectives for prevention, protection and response are being achieved.

Senior leaders are aware of commitments made to the public that aren't being met. But they aren't always making sure suitable plans are put in place to meet them. The service has a range of core measures (key performance indicators) to monitor performance against departmental targets. At the time of our inspection, the core measures were under review as leaders recognised they didn't always give a clear view of performance. New core measures hadn't yet been implemented. The service has some targets in place, but it isn't clear if the targets are leading to action. The service is aware it needs to do some work in this area and is analysing data to improve targets and accountability.

The service is making changes to improve its governance arrangements

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

As part of Northumberland County Council, the fire and rescue authority receives regular updates on the service, which the service's strategic leaders present at the assurance and challenge panel. The service uses core measures to inform progress across the service. But the service told us more core measures were needed 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 should make sure targets are clearly defined, measurable and aligned with workforce productivity, using service tracker targets to strengthen monitoring and show reductions in risk across the service.

The service has had recent changes in leadership and governance. At the time of our inspection, the changes to its structure and performance oversight weren't fully developed or accepted and understood by everyone. It is too soon to know if these changes will be effective. We look forward to seeing the impact of these changes in the future.

Preventing fires and other risks

Adequate

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

Fire and rescue services must promote fire safety, which includes giving fire safety advice. To identify people at greatest risk from fire, services should work closely with other organisations in the public and voluntary sectors, including police and ambulance services. They should share intelligence and risk information with these other organisations when they identify vulnerability or exploitation.

Areas for improvement

The service should strengthen its partnerships and co-ordinate risk modelling to make sure home fire safety check targeting focuses on risk.

The service should make sure it consistently carries out effective post-incident activity to support and reassure the community.

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 aligns with department activity

The service's prevention strategy is part of the community risk management plan (CRMP). The service has now aligned all prevention policies with the strategy. It has made some new appointments within the prevention team. Prevention staff are supported by a structured training programme.

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

The service's teams work with other relevant organisations on prevention. They share relevant information when needed across departments. The service uses information to adjust its planning assumptions and direct activity between its prevention, protection and response functions. For example, the service has trained operational crews to support the provision of high-risk home fire safety checks across the county. This has helped the department reduce a significant backlog of outstanding visits.

The service should improve how it targets risk

The service should improve its risk-based modelling to better direct prevention activity towards the people most at risk from fire and other emergencies. It has implemented a risk stratification methodology that aligns with the Safelincs scoring of vulnerability. This means time frames are allocated to cases according to their risk, allowing the service to identify required actions against specific risks efficiently. This ranges from three days for the highest priority to three weeks for the lowest. A Microsoft Power BI dashboard supports effective monitoring of performance and cases that are exceeding allocated time frames.

But some staff told us that co-ordination of the risk modelling approach wasn't always effective, resulting in the repeat targeting of addresses.

The service doesn't use enough information and data to target its prevention activity and isn't targeting people from under-represented communities. For example, the service has partnerships in place, but it doesn't evaluate the effectiveness of partnerships to make sure they are targeting risk effectively and efficiently. Often risk isn't targeted in rural areas. The service is aware of this and is making plans to increase this activity. The service could also do more to enhance its partnership working to increase the quantity and quality of referrals when targeting risk.

Staff are trained and competent to carry out home fire safety checks

Most staff told us they had the right skills and confidence to carry out home fire safety checks. These checks cover an appropriate range of hazards that can put vulnerable people at greater risk from fire and other emergencies. The service has provided prevention training across the service, including to operational crews, to enhance the understanding and provision of home fire safety checks.

The service carries out proportionate quality assurance of its home fire safety check activity. This process includes observational visits across the service to assess all aspects of a home fire safety check. It records the outcomes of all assessments and uses them to inform any future prevention training and share learning.

The service could improve its evaluation of its prevention activities to inform future objectives

The service has some evaluation tools in place to measure how effective its activity is and make sure all sections of its communities get appropriate access to the prevention services that meet their needs. For example, the service has improved how it evaluates some prevention activity to make sure it is effective. Its prevention education includes material from the King's Trust, Project Shield and the Extinguish Programme, which provide a wide range of educational information for young people that includes fire service-related topics such as road, water and agricultural safety messaging.

At the time of our inspection, the service had recently introduced a customer feedback survey to enhance the effectiveness of home fire safety checks across the county. This helps it to assess whether home occupiers make changes as a result of the information they receive during the visit.

But some staff told us that the service hadn't fully evaluated the effectiveness of the prevention activities outlined in the previous CRMP 2022–26. This means the service can't be sure what action is successfully reducing or mitigating risks or use any learning to inform changes in the updated CRMP 2026–30.

The service should strengthen partnership referral processes to make sure activity is focused on people most at risk

The service works with a range of other organisations to prevent fires and other emergencies.

In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service carried out 3,775 home fire safety visits. The service completed 2,200 home fire safety visits that were referrals from other agencies and 480 that led to the service making an onward referral to at least one other organisation.

We found that it routinely referred people at greatest risk to organisations that may better meet their needs. These organisations include:

- Citizens Advice
- Communities Together
- One Call, which provides needs assessments for specialist support.

Arrangements are also in place to receive referrals from others, such as:

- adult social care
- occupational therapists
- Age UK
- Alzheimer's Society
- oxygen providers

- local NHS providers.

The service acts appropriately on the referrals it receives in most cases. But we found incidents where partner agencies didn't share relevant information that could help mitigate or prevent fire and injury. The service should work with its partners to improve understanding of referral processes so that referrals sharing information about vulnerable members of the community are timely, accurate and consistent.

The service is confident when responding to safeguarding concerns

Staff we interviewed told us about occasions when they had identified safeguarding problems. They told us that they felt confident and trained to act appropriately and promptly. The Northumberland Adult and Children Safeguarding Partnership provides safeguarding training across the service.

The service needs to evaluate fire-setting interventions to understand what is effective

In the year ending 30 September 2025, the service attended 898 deliberate fire incidents, which has increased from 514 in the previous year. The rate of attendance at deliberate fire incidents was 271 per 100,000 population in the year ending 30 September 2025. This is higher than the England rate of 131.6 per 100,000 population.

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 interventions such as the Extinguish Programme, which has a dedicated officer to oversee cases where fire-setting is involved. The service works with agencies such as the King's Trust, Project Shield and the Youth Justice Service to mitigate fire-setting behaviour and reduce antisocial behaviour that is often associated with deliberate fires.

The service understands deliberate fire-setting as a significant risk within its communities. The service would benefit from evaluating activities to learn what is effective and inform and strengthen objectives within the CRMP.

Protecting the public through fire regulation

Good

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

Fire and rescue services should assess fire risks in certain buildings and, when necessary, require building owners to comply with fire safety legislation. Each service decides how many assessments it does each year. But services must have a locally determined, risk-based intervention programme for enforcing the legislation.

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

Main findings

The service has an effective protection strategy

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

Leaders responsible for protection have clearly communicated the strategy and 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 business fire reduction activity and effectively share information as needed. The service uses information to adjust planning assumptions and direct activity between its prevention, protection and response functions. This means it properly aligns its resources with risk. The service distributes risk information across all departments using a digital information-sharing form.

The service is improving its approach to targeting risk

The service has made some changes to its leadership of protection since our last inspection. It has reviewed its strategy, policies and processes to identify areas for improvement. It has also reviewed its risk-based intervention programme, which focuses on the highest-risk buildings in the service's area.

The service followed National Fire Chiefs Council guidance when developing its risk-based inspection programme. It uses a risk stratification process on recognised and local risks to decide the necessary frequency of inspections.

When we reviewed the service's audits of high-risk buildings, we found it had completed them in the time frames it had set itself. The introduction of a Microsoft Power BI dashboard has improved how effectively the service prioritises and allocates work to meet risk timescales and manage performance.

In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service set itself a high-risk building audit target of 12. It did achieve this target as it carried out 12 high-risk building audits. This is 100 percent of its target achieved.

The service has enough staff to support its protection department

The service has enough qualified protection staff to meet the requirements of its risk-based intervention programme. The service has carried out a review of the department to make sure staff levels are appropriate and targets are manageable.

Some operational staff have been trained to a level 3 fire safety auditing qualification to support this. This helps the service provide the range of audit and enforcement activity it needs.

In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service carried out 403 audits which were deemed unsatisfactory and carried out 377 enforcement activities as a result. This proportionate level of enforcement activity to unsatisfactory audits shows the service has enough resourcing.

Staff within the department receive the correct training and work to an appropriate accreditation framework.

The service monitors and maintains awareness of the requirements of the Building Safety Regulator

The Building Safety Act 2022 and the Fire Safety (England) Regulations 2022 have been introduced to bring about better regulation and management of tall buildings.

The 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. At an operational level, the service maintains awareness and engagement with Building Safety Regulator (BSR) developments through the BSR Operational Update meeting. This forum gives updates on national and regional developments, emerging BSR expectations and relevant operational considerations for fire and rescue services.

The quality of fire safety audits is consistent

We reviewed a range of audits that the service had carried out for a range of 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. The service has introduced a digital information-sharing form so that relevant information from its audits is available to operational teams and control room operators.

The service has an effective quality assurance process for its protection activity

The service carries out proportionate quality assurance of its protection activity. The protection department quality assurance process is supported by the protection competency framework. All quality assurance activity uses standardised templates aligned to the relevant audit level so that assessments are consistent and comparable. At the time of our inspection, the service carried out quality assurance for 100 percent of completed audits.

The service consistently uses its fire safety regulations enforcement powers proportionately

The service consistently uses its full range of enforcement powers and, when appropriate, it prosecutes those who don't comply with fire safety regulations. When possible, the service aims to support businesses to meet safety compliance and records its communications effectively. If responsible persons don't respond by enhancing safety measures, the service uses its enforcement powers proportionately. All enforcement actions are supported by Northumberland County Council's legal team.

In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service issued 1 alteration notice, 367 informal notifications, 5 enforcement notices and 4 prohibition notices. It didn't carry out any prosecutions. It completed two prosecutions in the five years from 2020/21 to 2024/25.

The service has improved how it works with other agencies to regulate fire safety and give advice

The service works closely with other enforcement agencies to regulate fire safety, and it routinely exchanges risk information with them. These agencies include public protection, safety advisory groups and building control. It also attends a council regulation and enforcement group.

The service uses a collaborative approach with other agencies to give advice. This includes advice on licensing, building consultation and temporary community events to make sure they meet fire safety requirements.

At the time of our inspection, the service had held recent consultation meetings with some agencies to enhance communication, improve processes and strengthen partnership working.

The service is responding effectively to licensing consultations

In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service responded to 98.1 percent of licensing consultations (106 of 108) within the required time frame. The service has met an increased demand since the previous year. In the year ending 31 March 2024, the service responded to 97 percent (87 of 89) within the required time frame. This means it consistently meets its statutory responsibility to comment on fire safety arrangements at new and altered buildings.

But the service hasn't met the increased demand for building consultations. In the year ending 31 March 2025, it completed 86.9 percent of building consultations (206 of 237) within the required time frame. In the year ending 31 March 2024, the service responded to 97.1 percent (200 of 206) within the required time frame.

The service works well with local businesses to promote compliance with fire safety legislation

The service proactively works with local businesses and other organisations to promote compliance with fire safety legislation. It has an informative web page that includes business advice and links to legislative advice and guidance. The service establishes good working relationships with businesses. It asks for feedback through a QR code to support learning and improvements.

Responding to fires and other emergencies

Inadequate

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service is inadequate 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.

Cause of concern

The service doesn't effectively gather and record or manage its site-specific risk information to protect firefighters and the public

This is documented in an accelerated cause of concern that we issued to the service on 28 April 2026.

Areas for improvement

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

The service should review and publish its response standards, including for control, to better inform the public.

The service should make sure it shares operational and organisational learning effectively and as soon as possible, and make sure staff understand it.

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 hasn't fully evaluated its response strategy objectives

The service has linked its response strategy to the risks identified in its community risk profile 2022–26. But the service told us it hadn't fully evaluated its response objectives to understand what is effectively reducing risk to inform the community risk management plan (CRMP) 2026–30.

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. This makes sure it has the right number of fire engines in the right locations to meet the risks it has identified. The service has also carried out a review in collaboration with an external company to analyse community risk and response provision across the county.

But the service hasn't reviewed its specialist resource provision to make sure it is fit for purpose and provides value for money. The service told us this review would be an objective in its CRMP 2026–30.

The service hasn't met its own response standards

The service has set out response standards in its community risk profile 2022–26. But the service doesn't always meet these standards.

The CRMP 2026–30 doesn't clearly report to the public on the service's inability to meet its existing standards or the impact this may have on service provision. At the time of our inspection, the standards were under review. The CRMP informs the public of the need to review the standards and that this is an important area of focus for the future.

Response standards help the service to measure how well the service is performing. They also provide clear standards for the public. The service should make sure it provides clear expectations for both the workforce and the community.

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. But locally set standards may be calculated differently to the data produced by the MHCLG.

MHCLG data shows that in the year ending 30 September 2025, the service's average response time to primary fires was 12 minutes and 28 seconds. This is slower than the average for services that are predominantly rural.

Using this measure, the service's average response time has increased from 11 minutes and 45 seconds in the year to 30 September 2024. This decline is predominantly due to an increase in drive time, which has increased from 8 minutes and 39 seconds to 9 minutes and 37 seconds during the same period.

The service has a risk model to manage resource availability efficiently

In the year ending 31 March 2025, availability of wholetime fire engines was 95.3 percent. This is an increase from the previous year when availability was 94.6 percent. During the same period, availability of on-call fire engines was 75.9 percent. This is a decrease from the previous year when availability was 78.7 percent.

The service manages fire engine availability in accordance with the risk across the county using a resource-to-risk model. It used an external company to analyse past data to decide the strategic locations for maximum fire engine coverage. This means the service can send available fire engines where they are likely to be most needed. The model also helps the service decide the number of fire engines it needs to meet community risk and demand. Control operators co-ordinate and monitor available fire engines.

The service has multi-skilled community risk and response support officers to support this process. These officers can be mobilised to areas of the county that need more on-call availability. This provides resilience to stations that may need support to keep a fire engine available.

Some staff told us that availability could be negatively affected by firefighters working dual or secondary contracts. Firefighters can hold specialist skills for the station, such as driving abilities or levels of incident command. If they have additional roles, they might not be available to carry out their specialist duties. The service is trying to recruit on-call posts across the county. But we heard there was a lack of workforce planning in relation to the number of staff and their capabilities.

The service doesn’t effectively gather, record and manage its site-specific risk information to protect firefighters and the public

During our last inspection in 2023, we identified the following areas for improvement:

- The service should make sure it gathers and records relevant and up-to-date risk information to help protect firefighters, the public and property during an emergency.
- The service should make sure operational staff are familiar with the risk sites in their local area, so they are better prepared to fight fires and carry out rescues safely.

We were disappointed to find that the service hadn’t made enough progress in addressing these two areas for improvement. We have therefore escalated this to an accelerated cause of concern.

We recognise that the service has carried out some work to improve how it manages and reviews its SSRI. This includes a review of the SSRI policy and a new quality assurance panel to assess risk sites and ensure consistency. But at the time of our inspection, the service told us it had identified 478 sites that required SSRI. Only 37 of these had been reviewed, which means the service can't be confident that its risk information is accurate.

We sampled a broad range of risk information the service had collected, including information on hospitals and high-priority chemical sites. Some of the cases we reviewed were being assessed or awaiting review from the panel. But risk information that is collected and submitted isn't uploaded until the quality assurance process is complete. This can cause delays to the risk information being available to operational crews.

Worryingly, we aren't confident that the service has identified all places of risk. Some operational staff were also unsure how to identify and record new risks.

The service collects some information about the highest-risk people, places and threats it has identified. But the information we reviewed was minimal considering the risk it was associated with, and inaccurate or out of date. For example, we found several sites with potential risks such as buildings containing high levels of chemicals, complex layouts or sleeping risks. But the service didn't hold any relevant risk information for them or have plans that would help to support incident management.

The service is using the Provision of Operational Risk Information System to review and grade risk. But we found some cases where staff hadn't graded risks correctly. This means risk information available to operational crews to manage incidents effectively isn't always accurate. The allocated category of risk applied to the SSRI also informs how often the service will return and review the site to update its risk information. This means the service may be unaware of changes that take place at risk sites during that period. Some staff told us they didn't feel confident in applying the Provision of Operational Risk Information System risk methodology to sites and that the service's training wasn't good enough.

The service is carrying out work to address the cause of concern in relation to risk information. We will monitor this to assess its improvements.

The service should improve how it monitors the competence of all operational staff

The service has incident commanders who are trained and regularly and properly assessed. The service uses an external company to validate competence. In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service required 123 incident commanders and had 119 accredited. It didn't have any incident commanders who were no longer accredited but still carrying out duties. The service reviews staff to make sure they hold the required incident command accreditation.

The service's senior leaders carry out Skills for Justice accredited training to support their competence. This helps the service to safely, assertively and effectively manage the full 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. 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.

But we found problems with how competency was co-ordinated and recorded. These have created inconsistencies in how the service monitors that competence of all operational staff is maintained using exercises or continuous personal development.

The service has had a significant number of staff promotions to various levels of command within a short time. Some commanders reported they were unclear what they needed to do to show and maintain competence. It is essential that staff are confident in understanding, monitoring and accurately recording their competence.

The service is improving its approach to evaluating operational performance

As part of our inspection, we reviewed a range of emergency incidents and training events.

Since our last inspection, the service has made some improvements to its approach to organisational learning. It introduced an organisational learning group, which has provided a clear structure for aligning priorities. It has established processes for priority learning (such as risk-critical information) and performance monitoring through the service improvement board. The group also processes any national operational or joint organisational learning.

The service has reviewed and updated its policies to set out defined triggers for different levels of debriefs, along with clear timescales for action. Some staff have received external debrief training, which they said had improved their understanding and practical application of the policy.

But these changes are recent, so it is too soon to assess their effectiveness or impact on practice. We can't assess whether they have been accepted and are being consistently applied across the service.

Some staff told us they weren't yet confident in the learning process, particularly in relation to reporting incidents and receiving shared learning. The service has taken steps to improve the process. But it is important that staff have confidence and trust the system for them to contribute effectively. Without this, there is a risk that opportunities for learning and improvement may be missed.

The service should make sure its fire control staff are supported to take part in training and exercising

We were disappointed to find that the service's control staff weren't always included in its command, training, exercise, debrief and assurance activity. Some staff told us this was often due to understaffing of on-duty control operators. The service's control room often relies on staff members working extra shifts because of a lack of staff. The service has recognised this as a risk on its corporate risk register.

At the time of our inspection, the service was preparing to introduce a new control mobilising system. This means control operators needed extra training so that they could be competent in the system when it was activated.

Some staff told us that resourcing and capacity within fire control were challenging. And some staff said extra demands and low resources had affected their morale.

The service needs to make sure its policies align with national operational guidance

We were disappointed to find that not all the service's policies were in line with national operational guidance. At the time of our inspection, the service had recently started to make some progress in this area by establishing a national operational guidance group to oversee and prioritise updates. But minimal work had taken place in this area across both operational and control policy update requirements. This is an area for improvement for the service.

Responding to major and multi-agency incidents

Requires improvement

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement 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).

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure it reviews its policies and procedures for mass evacuation and that staff understand them.

The service should make sure all staff understand its marauding terrorist attack procedures and consistently take part in effective multi-agency exercising to improve preparedness and 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 works well with other agencies to plan for some major 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. For example, it has a good relationship with the local resilience forum at all levels of command. This helps the service to work effectively with other agencies, including in areas such as training, business continuity, command and media.

The service has access to the county's incident response plan to support its approach to risk and manage incidents effectively. Northumberland County Council's emergency response document provides incident guidance to several agencies, including the fire and rescue service. All officers can access this plan to support strategic planning and decision-making.

The service has well-established plans for incidents involving severe weather and wildfires

During this inspection, we considered how well prepared the service is to respond to foreseeable major incidents, including severe weather events and wildfire incidents. We found that the service had some plans for and experience of dealing with these types of incidents at both a tactical and strategic level.

The service also provides wildfire training and guidance to other agencies, both nationally and internationally, which generates an income for the service. As a result, it has well-established plans and procedures in place to tackle wildfire incidents. The service has worked extensively with agricultural groups and local farmers to build knowledge and working relationships to be more effective during wildfire incidents.

It is familiar with some of the significant risks that neighbouring fire and rescue services may face, which it might reasonably be asked to respond to in an emergency. But it needs to do more. For example, some staff told us that risk information wasn't always accurate and up to date. The service should make sure it frequently updates risk information to better protect the public when it attends incidents in neighbouring service areas.

The service hasn't made progress in implementing the Grenfell Tower Inquiry recommendations

During our last inspection, we issued an area for improvement related to the service's policies and procedures for mass evacuation. We were disappointed to find that the service hadn't made enough progress in this area, and we are keeping this area for improvement open.

The service's area includes buildings that would require a simultaneous evacuation, including a newly constructed high-rise residential building. The service has carried out some familiarisation visits to the high-rise building. But staff still lack understanding of policies and procedures to effectively respond and manage an incident of this type. Furthermore, the service hasn't provided any practical training exercises that focus on mass casualty evacuation in a high-rise building fire. Most staff told us they didn't feel confident or well prepared to attend high-rise building fires. The service should urgently revisit its plans for responding to a high-rise building fire and make sure staff are confident in policies and procedures to manage the incident effectively.

The service does support neighbouring services at incidents across the border. But it won't support high-rise incident attendance due to the lack of capability.

Resilience and capabilities in the service's control room have reduced

The service is required to work closely with its control room on all practical training. This creates an established and effective communication method and a shared understanding of the incident and evacuations that are taking place.

During our inspection, we found that control's resilience and capabilities had reduced since our last inspection. The service no longer has dual mobilising and call management support from its neighbouring control room in Tyne and Wear. In the past, both services shared a mobilising system that allowed them to mobilise fire engines and command staff on each other's behalf. An upgrade to the Tyne and Wear mobilising system means that both services are now working from different models, so this resilience is no longer available.

But national support processes are in place that allow the service to contact other control rooms to help them answer high volumes of calls on its behalf, if needed.

The service also hasn't made enough progress in implementing the recommendations from the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. The service should implement and exercise an effective communication tool to help with mass evacuation. Some staff told us that they hadn't had such an exercise since our last inspection. The service should address these gaps urgently. We are keeping the area for improvement we issued in our last inspection open.

The service effectively applies the 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 provide evidence that it consistently follows these principles.

We sampled a range of incidents that the service had attended, such as those involving severe weather. We were pleased to find that the service had applied JESIP when sharing information with other agencies. For example, during a severe weather incident, the service effectively communicated and co-ordinated actions with other agencies to work together to clear roads. This allowed the service to better support vulnerable people.

The service refers to JESIP in all action notes to promote joint decision-making.

The service needs to improve its co-ordination of exercise programming

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. But the plan lacks detail and doesn't include the risks of foreseeable major incidents where the service could be required to give support or ask for help from neighbouring services.

In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service had attended two training exercises with neighbouring fire and rescue services. The number of training exercises with neighbouring fire and rescue services per 1,000 full-time equivalent firefighters is 7.2, which is lower than the England rate of 24.5.

Since our last inspection, the service hasn't managed training and exercising consistently, so its overall approach isn't co-ordinated. The management of this department has recently been stabilised. At the time of our inspection, we found a slight improvement in the service's exercising programme over the previous 12 months.

The service has a process for activating national resilience arrangements. But we found that it hadn't provided staff with enough training, so they weren't confident in using it.

The service needs to improve its preparedness to respond to marauding terrorist attacks

The service has access to national inter-agency liaison officers to help with communication and activity co-ordination between emergency services in the event of a marauding terrorist attack. The service has introduced a national control liaison officer contact into the control room to provide further resilience.

We found that some national inter-agency liaison officer representatives and some commanders from the service had attended multi-agency JESIP tabletop marauding terrorist attack exercises. But some staff told us they didn't take part in exercising to prepare them for incidents that involve marauding terrorist attacks. As a result, they didn't feel confident in their approach to such an incident. The service does use a video for firefighters to improve their knowledge. But its inconsistency in recording competence across the service means it can't be sure which staff have received this training or if the training is effective.

It is essential that practical training is extended across the service to operational responders so they become familiar with procedures associated with this incident type. This will help provide the most effective initial response and support the safety of the community.

The service works effectively with the local resilience forum to reduce risk

The service has good arrangements in place to respond to emergencies with agencies that make up the Northumbria local resilience forum. These arrangements include membership in the forum's groups involved with areas such as training, business continuity, risk, command and media.

The service has 24-hour access to communication channels that can be used to support and inform the local community about ongoing incidents.

The service has improved its awareness and use of national operational learning and national organisational 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 has implemented an organisational learning group that tracks and reviews progress on actions associated with submissions. The organisational learning group reports directly to the service improvement board to share areas for improvement. The service uses this learning to inform the planning assumptions it makes with other organisations. The learning group shares all information with the service using an action note to enhance learning.

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

Requires improvement

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement 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.

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure it has effective internal governance arrangements in place to hold senior officers to account for the corporate management of the service.

The service should make sure its workforce model supports its operational model to manage risk efficiently and effectively.

The service should make sure all its processes to support performance management are effective.

The service should make sure its fleet and estates management programmes are linked to its community risk management plan, and that it understands the long-term impacts of investment decisions.

The service should have a clear internal structure with appropriate governance arrangements to make sure the selection, design and implementation of projects is well managed, represents value for money and provides the intended outcomes.

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

Main findings

The service doesn't have effective internal governance and scrutiny to hold senior leaders to account

As part of Northumberland County Council, the Northumberland 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.

During our inspection, we heard that the county council was managing budgetary pressures and needed to make savings across the organisation. The service operates within the county council's wider structure and must follow its governance processes. For example, the service needs to contribute to the county council's savings requirements. The service must follow the county council's recruitment processes, including when the county council puts vacancy controls in place. Its bids for county council funding are considered with bids from other county council services.

Since our last inspection, the service has had a period of significant organisational instability within its leadership team. Its strategic oversight arrangements to manage financial and resourcing risks, performance and improvement plans have been ineffective. Its processes, controls and internal governance arrangements for managing strategic risks have been under evaluation.

The December 2025 scheme of delegation clearly sets out responsibilities for the service's senior leaders. But the service's internal governance and oversight arrangements to hold senior leaders to account for the corporate management of the service have proved ineffective. There isn't enough accountability at a strategic level to make sure work continues consistently and that it is reported effectively. The service hasn't made enough progress in the following areas:

- strategic oversight of the service's core measures (key performance indicators);
- closing the areas of improvement we issued in our 2023–25 report;

- aligning policies and procedures with national operational guidance; and
- implementing the recommendations from the Grenfell Tower Inquiry and Manchester Arena Inquiry.

In April 2025, the county council appointed an interim chief fire officer. Since then, the service has recognised it has internal governance gaps. It has reviewed and updated its model. This includes restructuring roles and responsibilities in the senior leadership team. But at the time of our inspection, changes to the governance structure and performance oversight were still new. This means the service can't assess whether these changes have had the intended impact.

As a result of our findings, we have identified a new area for improvement that the service should make sure it has effective internal governance arrangements in place. An effective internal governance structure should be able to withstand periods of absence within the middle manager and leadership team.

The service's resourcing plans need more work

The service sometimes uses its resources well to manage risk. For example, the service has evaluated its mix of crewing and duty systems. It has analysed its response cover and can show it deploys its fire engines and response staff to manage risk efficiently. The service has used data supported by an external company to assess risk across the county and apply risk modelling. The service reviews this data regularly to make sure it is meeting risk and demand. The service supports this using the cluster model, so that operational staff across the county can be used to strengthen on-call fire engine availability.

The service is taking steps to maintain availability of its on-call crews. Northumberland is classified as predominantly rural. The service has 15 fire stations and 22 fire engines. Eleven of the service's fire stations are on-call fire stations. The service works with both regional and national on-call groups to make sure they are sharing best practice on recruiting and retaining on-call firefighters.

But there are still several weaknesses that the service needs to address. Ineffective workforce planning and recruitment constraints are affecting the service's ability to allocate enough resources consistent with the risks and priorities it has identified in its community risk management plan (CRMP). The service has recognised the need to increase its resources to meet demand and improve its ability to achieve its objectives. But the county council rejected its growth bid for 2026/27. The growth bid included proposals to increase leadership capacity, specialist training roles, and staff in fire control, fire safety and HR.

The service isn't mitigating the issues identified in the corporate risk register that affect the implementation of its CRMP. For example, in 2024, the service bid for and secured funding from the county council to temporarily increase staff in fire control. At the time of our inspection, the service told us that, despite this funding, staffing levels in fire control had reduced further and often fell below the minimum requirement. This was the case even though fire control resourcing was rated as a red risk on the service's risk register. The service said that future recruitment would be delayed until existing staff were trained in the new mobilising system. This is because the service doesn't have enough capacity to train new recruits.

The service told us it needed approval from the county council to recruit staff. Due to the county council's financial position, the service can only recruit for an open vacancy. This hinders workforce planning. For example, the service has faced difficulties trying to recruit in advance of staff leaving because at that point the post isn't vacant.

The service has a lack of capacity at the training centre to provide risk-critical training. Some middle managers told us they had high workloads and many staff were in temporary roles.

Not enough capacity and capability, along with a lack of clear strategic direction and performance management, are contributing to the service not meeting its objectives and priorities.

As a result of our findings, we have identified this as a new area for improvement.

The service faces uncertain future financial challenges

In 2025/26, the service's net revenue budget was £22.7 million. The net revenue budget for 2024/25 was adjusted for inflation from £19.9 million to £21.4 million. This means the budget increased by 5.9 percent between 2024/25 and 2025/26 in real terms. The service's parent authority, Northumberland County Council, entirely funds the budget.

At the time of our inspection, the service's future financial challenges were uncertain. The county council faces financial challenges. Its medium-term financial plan shows it needs to find extra savings of £20 million in 2026/27 and a further £9 million in each of the following two years. The financial plan doesn't include any direct savings requirements for the service. But the service told us that although this financial plan was agreed, it now had to find savings of £750,000 by 2028/29, including £500,000 in 2026/27.

This limits the service's growth opportunities and affects its ability to plan in areas such as estates, fleet and recruitment.

The county council manages capital financing costs and the service's capital programme is part of the county council's wider capital plans. The service's capital plans, such as improvements to estates, have been delayed due to the processes it has to go through to justify proposed expenditure.

The county council holds the service's reserves. There is a robust process in place for the service to access them.

The service should improve how it manages performance through an effective governance structure

The service's arrangements for managing performance are weak in some areas, and don't clearly link resource use with its CRMP and its strategic priorities. For example, the service doesn't have enough oversight of areas such as training and the competency of staff across the organisation. Gaps in departmental management have contributed to inconsistency in reporting risk-critical inadequacies. Temporary managerial promotions have been made to departments across the service to provide accountability and stability. But the governance structure is yet to prove its effectiveness in how it manages and reports performance.

The service uses a range of core measures (key performance indicators) to monitor performance across the service. At the time of our inspection, they were under review and new targets had been approved for implementation from 1 April 2026. The service should make sure all processes to support performance management are effective and that targets are meaningful to reduce and mitigate risk.

The service is trying to do more to understand how it uses its wholetime firefighters. It collects some data on how these firefighters spend their time across day and night shifts, using station-based activity trackers that link to a digital dashboard. But it hasn't evaluated this work and processes aren't fully accepted or understood by everyone. The service recognises this and is aiming to improve the workforce's understanding of how and why it assesses staff performance and productivity across the organisation.

The service needs to do more to reduce the burden of responding to unwanted fire signals

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 September 2025, 39.5 percent of incidents attended in Northumberland were fire false alarms. The rate of attendance at incidents that were fire false alarms was 4.3 per 1,000 population. This is the same as the England rate of 4.3.

The service is taking only limited action to manage its response to unwanted fire signals. In the year ending 31 March 2025, 13.7 percent (1,086 of 7,945) of emergency calls to the service were automatic fire alarms. Of these, 37.6 percent weren't attended, which is lower than the England average of 44.6 percent. But the service recognises that this is a priority and has assigned a dedicated member of staff to help the service reduce the burden of responding to unwanted fire signals. This is a strategic objective within the CRMP 2026–30.

The service has evaluated its collaborations to make sure they provide value for money

In 2024/25, the service's expenditure was £20.9 million, which is £63.12 per head of its population. This is higher than the typical range compared to all services in England.

There are regular reviews to consider all of the service's expenditure, including its non-pay costs. This scrutiny makes sure the service gets value for money. For example, a member of the county council's finance team attends the senior leadership team meetings each month to update on actual expenditure compared to the revenue and capital budgets set. The service monitors overtime expenditure each week. Overhead costs are held within county council budgets.

The service uses the county council's procurement processes. It can access professional procurement advice from the county council.

It made all of its planned £95,000 savings in 2023/24. The service didn't have any planned savings forecast in 2022/23 or 2024/25. But it has contributed to the county council's overall savings by providing space for other agencies in the service's premises, trialling electric vehicles and collaborating with others. The service hasn't quantified this contribution in its efficiency and productivity plan.

The service comprehensively monitors and reviews the benefits and results of its collaborations. In our last inspection, we found that the service needed to evaluate existing collaborations to make sure they benefitted the service. The service has produced a professional partnerships register to review and assess collaborations to evaluate their benefits to the service. This review will help the service make sure collaborations are effective and provide value for money.

The service has reviewed its collaboration with Northumbria Police. It found that it needed to revise its contract for providing the force with space in the service's headquarters and has made a new proposal to the force.

Some of the service's stations need improvement

The service's capital programme and estate and fleet strategies are linked to its CRMP. But they don't include enough detail. When changes in fleet and estate provision present opportunities to improve effectiveness and efficiency, it doesn't always exploit them.

Since our last inspection, the service has carried out a survey of its estates portfolio to assess the need for maintenance and improvements. The survey findings included the need for structural changes to stations to provide effective decontamination facilities and zoned areas, better accessibility to stations, improved facilities for women, and the redevelopment of Berwick Fire Station. Financial constraints are delaying necessary improvements to the service's estates and limiting the service's ability to plan effectively. Some station developments have been delayed and only upgrades that affect health and safety are being made. This could lead to further decline and make it harder for the service to run effectively and meet demand.

The service has carried out some work to make sure its fleet meets its requirements. It has extended the lifecycle of some vehicles to improve efficiency. But it hasn't yet reviewed its specialist equipment, which is included as an objective in the CRMP 2026–30.

The service has bought an aerial ladder platform fire engine, which it uses to manage incidents at height. It has used this across the county since 2023. But some staff told us the service hadn't given them enough training to make sure it was used effectively and safely. The service should manage the introduction of new vehicles effectively so that staff are familiar and feel confident in using them as part of a managed project.

The service should make sure its fleet and estates management programmes are fully linked to its CRMP. It should also make sure it understands the long-term impacts of its investment decisions.

The service has improved how it uses data through technology

The county council has an IT overarching corporate strategy 2022–26 in which it commits to resilient and reliable provision of technology that is innovative, up to date and high performing. It is responsible for providing an IT function across its departments, including the fire and rescue service.

Since our last inspection, the service has made some improvements using technology. It has departmental Microsoft Power BI dashboards to better monitor and actively manage workforce activity in real time. This means it can align activity with risk priorities such as prevention and protection using live data.

By aligning activity with service targets, the service can better manage workloads and make sure staff are working effectively and efficiently.

The service needs to improve how it implements projects to make sure they are well managed and cost effective

The service's arrangements for managing change are weak. It doesn't have a clear internal structure with appropriate governance arrangements to make sure progress against projects and programmes is monitored, scrutinised and challenged.

During our inspection, we reviewed some of the service's projects. These included the implementation of pdrPro software to record competency, the service's procurement of a new mobilising system and the induction of its aerial ladder platform. The service's governance and decision-making around projects and the management of risks wasn't always robust. This has resulted in delays, inadequate system implementation, a lack of training and some financial implications. This hasn't created the expected efficiencies for the service and in some areas has increased pressures across the workforce.

We found the service didn't have a benefits register or any effective process for recording benefits. But the service told us that its project management processes had been updated to include post-project evaluation.

As part of the service's restructure of its overall governance model, a programme and projects board now reviews and follows up on outstanding risks and includes measures of accountability coupled with regular reporting. But this working practice isn't fully accepted or understood by everyone, and it isn't clear what effect this will have on service project implementation. The service should make sure it has a clear internal structure with appropriate governance arrangements so that project selection, design and implementation are well managed, and projects represent value for money and provide the intended outcomes.

Promoting, embedding and improving values and culture

Inadequate

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service is inadequate 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.

Cause of concern

The service doesn't communicate with its staff effectively

Staff don't trust the service's feedback and reporting processes and aren't confident about raising concerns. The service doesn't have well-defined values that align with the Core Code of Ethics and make sure staff comply with them.

Recommendations

- The service should improve its methods of communication and build greater staff trust in its feedback and reporting processes.
- The service should make sure staff feel heard, supported and able to raise concerns with confidence.
- The service should implement service values that align with the Core Code of Ethics and make sure staff understand and comply with these values.

We have asked the service to provide an action plan detailing how it intends to address the recommendations above.

Areas for improvement

The service should proactively monitor working hours (including overtime) to improve staff well-being and make sure working hours align with working time regulations.

The service should make sure it provides adequate welfare facilities for staff attending long-lasting incidents.

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

Main findings

The service doesn't have a clearly defined set of values outlining expected staff behaviour and standards

During our inspection, Northumberland County Council was reviewing its organisational values. These values apply across all organisations and departments within the county council structure, including the fire and rescue service. This meant that the service didn't have a clearly defined set of values it could promote across the workforce. This limits the service's ability to make sure staff fully understand the behaviour and standards required of them.

The service needs to do more to make sure it effectively implements and integrates the Core Code of Ethics and that staff understand it. Some staff told us they weren't aware of the Core Code of Ethics and the five principles to guide staff to act responsibly, fairly and transparently.

It is essential that all fire and rescue services have an established set of values and behaviours. Service values support all aspects of services' work and effective fire and rescue services to the public.

In our workforce survey, 67 percent of respondents (78 of 117) agreed that senior leaders consistently modelled and maintained the service's values, 88 percent of respondents (103 of 117) agreed that their manager consistently modelled and maintained the service's values and 81 percent of respondents (95 of 117) agreed that colleagues consistently modelled and maintained the service's values.

But a lack of structured values means the culture of the organisation isn't always positive. We heard that some behaviours didn't meet the standards expected, and that the service didn't have a strong culture of challenge. For example, we found that not all staff modelled positive behaviours consistently and homophobic and misogynistic language was sometimes used. This doesn't promote a safe environment to work in.

Some staff told us there was a fear of challenging unacceptable behaviours. There was a lack of trust in reporting processes and some worried about repercussions if they said anything. In our workforce survey, 57 percent of respondents (67 of 117) agreed that they felt safe to challenge unacceptable behaviour in their service.

The service needs to do more to make sure all staff feel valued and that their voices are heard. This will improve staff confidence and provide a space in which they feel safe to speak out about unacceptable behaviours.

The service has secured a strategic lead in its senior leadership team to review values and culture. But at the time of our inspection, the role was still new. It is too early to assess its impact.

Some staff lack trust in the service's feedback processes

The service has arrangements in place to communicate with staff, but its arrangements to take account of their legitimate concerns are limited.

In our workforce survey, 56 percent of respondents (66 of 117) agreed that they felt confident in the processes for providing feedback to all levels of leadership.

The service has made attempts to improve how it communicates with its workforce. It has appointed a communications lead to support organisational messages, campaigns and updates to its digital information. During our inspection, we saw that this had improved how it communicated and how it analysed data to understand its impact. For example, chief's chats now mean staff can submit direct questions to the chief, which they can do anonymously. This platform allows the chief to address questions in short, filmed presentations, which are uploaded to the service's intranet every month to allow easy access.

But some staff told us that this wasn't enough. Some said they had raised legitimate concerns with leaders, but the service had taken no steps to resolve them. An instability in leadership positions across the service has contributed to this, along with inconsistency in how effective and visible leaders are in their roles and their commitment to addressing feedback. Some staff said they wouldn't report matters to line managers, senior leaders or welfare officers because they believed these wouldn't stay confidential.

In our workforce survey, 41 percent of respondents (48 of 117) agreed that they were confident their feedback would be acted on.

The service has a Safecall feedback process to allow staff members to anonymously report unacceptable behaviours or challenge relevant issues. The service told us it hadn't received any reports through the Safecall process in the past 12 months. But our independent reporting line has received several reports. This suggests a lack of trust in reporting processes across the service and difficulties accessing them to report concerns effectively. During our inspection, we tried to access the Safecall reporting tool using the service's intranet system but it wasn't easy to find. This may be a contributary factor to the low number of reports.

The service hasn't carried out background checks on all staff

The service isn't fully compliant with safeguarding legislation. We found that appropriate background checks hadn't been completed for all existing members of staff. The service told us most outstanding cases were in progress. But at the time of our inspection, it couldn't be sure all staff members met the appropriate requirements. If the service doesn't complete background checks on existing staff, it isn't effectively reducing the risk of abuse, harm and neglect for both the public and staff.

The service has committed to background checks within the recruitment process. In the year ending 31 March 2025, all new recruits who needed a background check had one. The service is carrying out enough background checks for new members of staff.

The service needs to make sure it has an effective people and culture strategy that all staff understand

At the time of our inspection, it was clear that the service had done little work on its strategy to improve its culture. If it doesn't have a clear and well-understood people and culture strategy, the service can't make sure staff understand and comply with expected behaviours.

This service introduced its people and culture strategy in January 2026. This has a strategic objective to "build a positive, inclusive and high performing organisation". The service is using this strategy to adjust its governance processes. It is also aiming to improve its understanding of the impact of this strategy on its staff and the public.

The service should improve its welfare facilities at operational incidents

The service has done some work to understand the effectiveness of its welfare facilities provision for operational crews attending incidents. During our inspection, several staff members told us the provision of welfare facilities wasn't good enough, especially for incidents that are lengthy. Staff are reluctant to ask for welfare provision while at the scene of an incident. The service can call on volunteer agencies for refreshments and temporary hygiene facilities. But these aren't always available, especially in rural areas. So sometimes crews don't have access to welfare facilities.

At the time of our inspection, the service had recognised that it needs to improve welfare facilities provision to align with the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974. It has carried out some work to better understand how its provision can be improved.

The service should make sure welfare facilities are available for staff attending incidents.

The service should do more to eliminate bullying, harassment and discrimination

The service should improve staff understanding of bullying, harassment and discrimination, including their duty to eliminate them. In our January 2026 workforce survey, 24 percent of respondents (28 of 117) told us that they had felt bullied or harassed by members of their service in the past 12 months. A further 9 percent of respondents (11 of 117) preferred not to say. And 24 percent (28 of 117) told us that they had felt discriminated against by members of their service during the same period.

We asked the service to tell us about grievances that were related to conduct matters only (and not to include, for example, those against organisational policy).

As at 31 March 2025, there were no live grievances and 4 disciplinary cases. Of these disciplinary cases, 3 were misconduct cases and 1 was a gross misconduct case.

The service has clear policies and procedures in place. But not all staff are confident about how well it deals with cases of bullying, harassment and discrimination, and grievances and discipline. At the time of our inspection, the service had made recent changes to the discipline and grievance processes to improve staff perceptions and how the service manages cases. As a result, all grievance and discipline cases will be dealt with by the county council's people department. This will provide consistency and knowledge when making decisions that may affect staff members or the organisation.

The service has provided training for supervisory staff across all stations to review and refresh their knowledge on how the service can and will support supervisors with people-related queries. A dedicated people-focused business partner offers supervisors guidance so they are consistent across the service when implementing policy. Staff feedback on this training was positive. Staff also had extra training on investigating discipline and grievance cases. Staff lost trust when the service didn't always follow policies and procedures. The introduction of HR support aims to rebuild trust and provide independence to case management.

The service doesn't always offer 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 service can't show how it is sharing with staff the learning it has gained from dealing with grievance and discipline cases.

The service is improving its provision of physical and mental well-being support

The service has effective and well-understood health and safety policies and procedures in place. In our workforce survey, 89 percent of respondents (104 of 117) agreed they understood the policies and procedures the service had in place to make sure staff can work safely. The service's staff can access the county council's people and culture strategy. This strategy includes a wide range of options for promoting people support and well-being. Staff across the service can easily access support agencies using the service and county council intranet platforms.

In our last inspection, we issued an area for improvement that the service should make sure its occupational health unit was effective and that staff could benefit from a knowledgeable, supportive and accessible service. In response, the service commissioned an external occupational health provider to provide independent medical services, including rehabilitation options, medical examinations and employee health management. This will support mental and physical well-being services for staff. We look forward to reviewing its effect on staff well-being.

The service needs to review how it monitors working hours across the service

As at 31 March 2025, 43.7 percent of wholetime firefighters were on a dual contract within the service, and 18.5 percent had registered external secondary employment.

In our 2021/22 inspection, we issued a cause of concern that the management of dual contracts for staff working on-call and wholetime across the service must be improved.

In our 2025–27 inspection, we found that the same service policy was still in place. But we heard this wasn't always followed and that there was no effective monitoring to make sure staff take appropriate rest breaks between contracts. For example, a firefighter can work as a wholetime firefighter covering a standard shift pattern and can also be on-call and responding to incidents when not working their primary contract hours. This means that firefighters can attend incidents as an on-call firefighter without enough rest. The service isn't monitoring this to make sure staff are fit to work. This also applies when firefighters are working on secondary contracts for external organisations.

Staff told us that capacity was low at all levels across the service, and that some staff often worked excessive hours to meet the service's needs. It is clear that some employees have a sense of pride and commitment to the service and the teams in which they work. But this can lead to some staff, including officers, working longer than their contracted hours to maintain the level of activity across the service. Sickness absence and stress could increase if managers don't monitor staff working hours and make sure staff well-being is prioritised.

The service needs to do more to make sure staff are following the service's policy on well-being and national working time regulations. This includes monitoring secondary and dual contracts.

Training and developing the right people with the right skills

Inadequate

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service is inadequate 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.

Cause of concern

The service doesn't have a system that accurately and effectively records or monitors staff competency, training and skills

Not all staff understand who is responsible for recording and maintaining their competency.

Recommendations

- The service should make sure it has an effective, accurate and accessible system to record and monitor the training and skills of its operational staff.
- The service should make sure its records for risk-critical competencies, such as breathing apparatus, driving fire engines and incident command, are accurate and up to date.
- The service should make sure staff understand its competency requirements and that it is their own responsibility to monitor and maintain their competency and check their competency record is accurate.
- The service should improve how it applies the performance development review process in line with training and competency.

We have asked the service to provide an action plan detailing how it intends to address the recommendations above.

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure its governance structure includes strategic oversight of decisions that affect succession planning and workforce planning, capacity and capability.

The service should make sure its workforce plan takes full account of the skills and capabilities it needs to implement its community risk management plan.

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

Main findings

The service needs to improve its workforce planning

The service does some workforce planning, but it doesn't take full account of the skills and capabilities it needs to effectively carry out its CRMP 2026–30. We didn't find enough evidence that the service's planning allowed it to fully consider workforce skills and overcome any gaps in capability.

For example, Northumberland County Council decides the number of staff the service can employ. The county council's strategic workforce planning toolkit manages organisational resources against the overarching corporate financial plan. It focuses on baseline staffing figures, along with supply and demand. But it doesn't specifically consider the CRMP or the resources the service needs to meet the objectives within it. This means that, although the service has the staff numbers agreed by the county council, it must work efficiently to meet the demands of the CRMP.

Often staff across the service are responsible and accountable for more than one department or area of focus in their roles, including leaders. For example, some wholetime firefighters are working on a secondary contract as associate trainers to support operational training provision.

It is essential that the service's strategic governance includes effective workforce planning with continuous oversight. This will make sure the service has the capacity and capability to meet the needs of the public and reduce risk across the county.

The service is restricted in planning for future roles and can't begin a recruitment process in advance of the post becoming vacant. This causes delays and difficulties in transferring knowledge and skills. The service also needs to do more to improve the way it considers its future needs and succession planning. The service has done some work to address this in its basic form. It has identified risk-critical roles across the service and has recorded them on the service's risk register. The service has introduced a people and culture board to review and strengthen the workforce planning process. But the service needs to have a better understanding of staff requirements and make sure it supports succession planning and development of existing staff. This will help it to meet the needs of the CRMP to ensure public safety.

The service can't be sure of the competency of its workforce

Although there is a system in place to review workforce capabilities, it is ineffective, and there is a risk that staff may lack important skills for the future. The service can't be sure of the competency, training and skills of its staff.

In April 2025, the service transferred to a new competency recording system, pdrPro. This system should allow complete and comprehensive recording of competencies. But the system was implemented without enough capacity to record necessary service data. Also, crews haven't received enough training to manage the transfer and updating of data from one system to the other. This has resulted in crews across the county maintaining and recording competencies using varying inconsistent methods such as electronic spreadsheets and paper-based recording.

The service can't be sure staff are competent to fulfil their roles due to inaccurate, inconsistent and out-of-date data. During our inspection, we found several inconsistent recordings of training and competence. We also found that there was some confusion about who was responsible for recording and maintaining the competence of each firefighter.

The service is unable to monitor the development needs of staff members if their competency data is inaccurate or out of date. Monitoring of performance is also difficult if staff aren't updating their skills and knowledge regularly. Some staff told us they used to be able to access online learning and development resources that they needed to do their jobs effectively, but that these modules weren't available anymore. This is likely to affect what the service can offer the public.

The service should make sure operational crews have access to risk-critical training

We acknowledge that the service has been going through a period of change in leadership and governance structures. This includes a new manager to oversee the service's training provision. The new manager has made changes such as introducing working groups across the training department to align and co-ordinate service priorities.

But at the time of our inspection, we found the service didn't treat all risk-critical training as a sufficiently high priority. We found access to risk-critical training wasn't always available. For example, the service hadn't provided any practical training to operational crews to prepare them to attend a high-rise building fire or to carry out an immediate building evacuation. Worryingly, the service hasn't made enough progress in meeting the recommendations of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry, including the recommendation that services across England focus on communication, co-ordination and staff training.

The service needs to improve its co-ordination and provision of training

The service has identified parts of its training and development provision that some staff have found difficult to access or use. We found that access to operational training could be difficult and that scheduling wasn't always co-ordinated effectively. Staff told us that on-call staff would benefit from training schedules that included evenings and weekends, because it is mainly an on-call service. The service has acknowledged this and is reviewing training provision so that it becomes easier to access.

Some employees said they weren't aware who was responsible for monitoring and booking risk-critical assessments such as breathing apparatus. And they weren't clear what was required of them to make sure they were competent in all areas of their role. The service's policy is that this is the responsibility of the person seeking assessment. But staff told us they didn't know when and how to access competency training to ensure operational effectiveness.

The opportunity for firefighters to be exposed to realistic fire scenarios is rare. Some staff told us that training assessments didn't always provide a safe space to learn and ask questions. They felt their performance was being tested in an environment that was more challenging than supportive. It is essential that firefighters are given a safe learning environment when carrying out training for operational incidents.

The service uses continuous personal development sessions to update command groups. Staff told us this wasn't structured and that there was inconsistency in the information provided.

The service needs to improve the learning and development it offers

Although the service provides some learning and development resources, these don't meet the needs of its staff or of the service. For example, some staff told us that they had been temporarily promoted into roles without enough development in areas such as leadership and management.

The service offers development programmes at supervisory and middle management levels. We found that staff were using these programmes. But it wasn't clear what the service was doing to promote these programmes.

When they are recruited, operational firefighters have to complete a development folder to record and verify their progress. Operational firefighters who are in development undergo 10, 20 and 30-month validation assessments. Some staff told us that development wasn't always prioritised, and preparation for assessments wasn't structured or timely. These assessments don't always take place.

The service should make sure firefighters who are in development are assessed in line with the service's policy.

Ensuring fairness and diversity

Inadequate

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service is inadequate 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.

Cause of concern

The service hasn't made enough progress to improve equality, diversity and inclusion

It hasn't made sure all staff understand the benefits of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and their role in promoting these values. This was an area for improvement in our last inspection.

Recommendations

- The service should implement a robust EDI strategy to make progress with areas for improvement.
- The service should improve the quality and accessibility of its EDI training so that all staff have a good understanding of EDI.
- The service should improve the declaration, collection and use of equality data.
- The service should make better use of internal and external support networks to inform its EDI approach and target activity.

- The service should make sure equality impact assessment training, completion and quality assurance processes are robust and consistently applied so that equality impact assessments effectively inform and promote change.

We have asked the service to provide an action plan detailing how it intends to address the recommendations above.

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 hasn't made enough progress in improving EDI

In our previous inspections, we found the service needed to improve its approach to EDI and we issued areas for improvement related to this.

Disappointingly, in this inspection we found the service hadn't maintained some of the improvements it had made. The service's progress had declined.

During this inspection, we found the service no longer had a strategic lead to oversee EDI implementation across departments. The service said it relied on Northumberland County Council for EDI advisers. But at the time of our inspection, the existing county council EDI advisory team was being reconfigured, which affected the service's ability to get advice or guidance.

The service recognises the need to make progress in EDI. It has worked with the county council to secure funds for a lead for people and culture. This position will help improve the strategic approach to EDI. It will be part of the service's senior leadership team to show this area's importance across the service.

We look forward to seeing the impact of this new role.

The service should improve the quality and accessibility of EDI training

EDI training is part of the county council's eLearning packages. We found the service had an inconsistent approach to monitoring and recording EDI training. It wasn't clear who had done this training or when.

In our last inspection, we found the service had introduced an accredited training package for supervisory staff. This is no longer used. Some staff said the training was ineffective and wasn't compatible with roles within the fire service. Some described the training as meaningless and a tick-box exercise. The service needs to do more to make sure staff at all levels understand EDI.

In our workforce survey, 77 percent of respondents (90 of 117) agreed that they felt comfortable being themselves at work. But some staff have reported experiencing negative and non-inclusive comments, which don't support a safe and respectful working environment. This appears to be linked to gaps in service training, and a lack of clarity around organisational values and expected behaviours. Most staff understand what is expected of them and respect colleagues across the workforce. But we heard that some staff didn't show acceptable behaviour.

The service needs to strengthen its equality impact assessment process

Although the service has a process in place to assess equality impact, it doesn't properly assess and act on the impact on each protected characteristic. The service has adopted the National Fire Chiefs Council screening tool for equality impact assessments (EQIAs). The EQIAs are presented at the policy guidance information group for strategic review and assurance. But we found that although the policy was quality assured, there was less focus on the content of the EQIA and any impacts or actions.

During our inspection, we sampled several of the service's EQIAs aligned with various pieces of work across the service. We found cases where EQIAs weren't applied consistently when changes had been made to policy. We also saw examples of where data wasn't accurate and there were negative impacts without any action.

The service carried out some EQIA training across the service in 2023, but this training hasn't been refreshed.

The service needs to improve diversity in its recruitment

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

The service needs to do more to make sure its recruitment policies are fair and accessible to applicants from a range of backgrounds. The service advertises its posts, through Women in the Fire Service UK and the Asian Fire Service Association. But it needs to do more. It needs an effective system to understand and remove the risk of disproportionality in its recruitment processes.

The service doesn't use the county council's team to support any positive action in recruitment and promotion processes. If it did, it could make sure processes are fair and that it considers EDI in all elements of recruitment.

Although the service has some processes for gathering staff feedback, these aren't consistent or wide ranging. For example, the county council has network groups in place. But the service doesn't have committed representation at these groups and rarely uses the meeting outcomes to promote workforce activity and direct change. Some staff weren't aware that the groups were available for them to attend or approach for advice and guidance.

The service should improve its collection and use of equality data

The service does collect some data to inform change and positive action, but it could improve this. We found the service didn't consult with network groups to inform recruitment processes to better understand positive action. The service should broaden its use of data and consultation to fully understand barriers to recruitment and disproportionality.

The service has made some improvements to increasing staff diversity in some areas of the organisation

As at 31 March 2025, 3.7 percent (5 people) of the service's staff were from an ethnic minority background compared to 2.3 percent in the local population and 6.4 percent throughout all fire and rescue services in England. But 64 percent of staff didn't state their ethnicity. It is important for staff to understand the service is asking for this data so it can make sure it is supporting those individuals appropriately.

For the same period, 17.5 percent of the service's staff were women, compared to an average of 20.8 percent throughout all fire and rescue services.

The number of firefighters from an ethnic minority background was 1. This number has stayed the same since 31 March 2020, when it had reduced from 2.

As at 31 March 2025, the proportion of women firefighters had increased from 9.2 percent (29 women) to 9.4 percent (30 women) compared to the previous year. The service told us it recruited 12 firefighters in January 2026. Of these, 9 recruits were men and 3 were women.

Leading people effectively

Inadequate

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service is inadequate 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.

Cause of concern

The service lacks clear strategic direction, consistent and confident leadership, and effective accountability to meet its objectives

It doesn't have good processes for developing leaders and not all staff feel promotions processes are fair and accessible. Leaders don't always model service values.

Recommendations

- The service should make sure that its strategy and priorities are clearly defined and are clearly communicated by senior leaders.
- The service should make sure it has a fair and accessible process to identify, develop and support all leaders.
- The service should make sure all leaders are held accountable for managing staff performance and for progress in meeting strategic objectives.
- The service should make sure all leaders create a positive and open culture by promoting and modelling the service's values.

We have asked the service to provide an action plan detailing how it intends to address the recommendations above.

Area for improvement

The service should make sure its promotion processes are fair and accessible and have independent oversight and scrutiny.

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

Main findings

The service doesn't effectively manage or communicate its strategic direction

Since our last inspection, the service has been through some significant changes in leadership. This instability has affected overall service provision.

Senior leaders haven't effectively communicated the aims and objectives in the CRMP to staff at all levels. Leaders aren't clear about service priorities, or how these priorities are monitored and actioned through its governance and reporting structure.

The service recognises that its performance measures require review to make sure they are meaningful, support strategic direction and effectively mitigate risk. Staff describe activity across the service as reactive with changing priorities. As a result, there have been periods when staff were unclear about their objectives and didn't have meaningful targets to work towards. The service also hasn't had good enough ways for staff to communicate with senior leaders in an open and meaningful way.

Some staff said they had a low level of trust in their leaders. In our workforce survey, 57 percent of respondents (67 of 117) agreed that senior leaders clearly communicated the service's objectives.

The service has worked to improve methods of communication across the workforce, which include:

- chief's chats – filmed answers to staff questions, posted on the service's intranet;
- Flashpoint – a biweekly e-newsletter;
- The Business – Northumberland County Council's formal newsletter; and
- The Buzz – Northumberland County Council's informal newsletter.

But during the service's period of instability, it significantly limited its communications. This led to a lack of trust in the leadership team and how it manages change and communication, particularly in times of uncertainty. In our workforce survey, 56 percent of respondents (65 of 117) agreed that senior leaders kept staff informed about matters that affect them.

At the time of our inspection, recent changes to the governance structure had brought some improvements. The introduction of middle manager meetings is making sure departmental managers are updated about strategic priorities and the service's progress against CRMP objectives. Some middle managers have had positive impacts on departments and direct activity towards reducing risk.

The service needs to do more to develop leaders

In our last inspection, we found that the service had developed a talent management portfolio supported by the talent identification, development and promotion process. This document outlines a framework to identify, develop and promote supervisory and middle management leaders. But the service needs to do more to fully apply this to both operational and support staff to provide better opportunities for everyone.

There is an inconsistent approach to leadership development across the service. For example, some levels of management don't have any development programmes aligned to their role and some existing programmes aren't available to non-operational staff members.

The service isn't doing all it can to equip its leaders to lead effectively. Since our last inspection, changes in the service have resulted in some staff across the organisation progressing into management roles without having fully developed the skills they need to fulfil the role. Staff feedback indicates that training and development for new leaders is inconsistent and doesn't support promotion timelines. This may affect new leaders' confidence in managing the range of challenges they face once they are in the role.

The service has recognised this and has implemented development sessions at a supervisory level to cover subjects such as absence management and difficult conversations. Staff feedback on these sessions is positive. But the service needs to do more to make sure leaders at all levels have the skills to manage staff effectively and address issues such as underperformance and capability.

Not all staff have specific and individual objectives or have had their performance assessed in the past year. In our workforce survey, 58 percent of respondents (68 of 117) agreed that the service's performance management systems allowed them to achieve their potential. Some staff told us the approach to developing staff was inconsistent. This meant leadership styles and decision-making could also be inconsistent.

Leaders need to do more to create a positive culture across the workforce

We were disappointed to find that leaders didn't always act as role models. For example, staff don't feel fully comfortable raising concerns or speaking candidly with service leaders.

In our workforce survey, only 47 percent of respondents (55 of 117) agreed that leaders at all levels promoted a positive culture. Staff told us this meant suitable candidates didn't always want to progress within the service.

As a result, leaders aren't proactively developing or supporting a positive workplace environment.

Leaders aren't active in challenging misconduct, including bullying, harassment and discrimination. And some staff don't trust them to take their concerns seriously. There is inconsistency in how service leaders challenge unacceptable behaviours. This doesn't help staff understand what behaviours are acceptable.

The service's strategic people and culture lead plans to focus on this area and report to the board with any findings and progress. We look forward to seeing what impact this has on the organisation.

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

The service needs to do more to make sure its promotion and progression processes are fair. In our workforce survey, 48 percent of respondents (56 of 117) agreed that the promotion process in the service was fair.

The service has made some changes to improve the promotions and recruitment policy. But we found it could improve transparency and fairness to applicants.

All recruitment has been managed within the service. It hasn't always included the county council's people department. For example, we found that independent panel members weren't always present during interviews.

Some staff told us that changes to promotion and progression processes were frequent and feedback wasn't always given. This leads to a lack of trust in the process and outcomes across the workforce.

Since our last inspection, the service has been managing vacant roles and long-term absence. It has created about 39 temporary positions across the service to address this. A high proportion of the workforce are on temporary promotion. As at 31 March 2025, 10.3 percent of the workforce were on temporary promotion. The average length of temporary promotions was 289 days, which is the same as the England average. The service is working towards reducing this figure.

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