

Fire & Rescue Service 2021/22

Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service



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About this inspection

This is our third inspection of fire and rescue services in England. We first inspected Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service in November 2018, publishing a report with our findings in June 2019 on the service's effectiveness and efficiency and how it looks after its people. Our second inspection, in autumn 2020, considered how the service was responding to the pandemic. This inspection considers for a second time the service's effectiveness, efficiency and people.

In this round of inspections of all 44 fire and rescue services in England, we answer three main questions:

1. How effective is the fire and rescue service at keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks?
2. How efficient is the fire and rescue service at keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks?
3. How well does the fire and rescue service look after its people?

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

What inspection judgments mean

Our categories of graded judgment are:

- outstanding;
- good;
- requires improvement; and
- inadequate.












Good is our expected graded judgment for all fire and rescue services. It is based on policy, practice or performance that meet pre-defined grading criteria, which are informed by any relevant [national operational guidance](#) or standards.




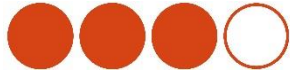


If the service exceeds what we expect for good, we will judge it as outstanding.

If we find shortcomings in the service, we will judge it as requires improvement.

If there are serious, critical or systemic failings of policy, practice or performance of the fire and rescue service, then consideration will be given to a graded judgment of inadequate.

Overview

Question	This inspection	2018/19
 Effectiveness	 Good	Requires improvement
Understanding fires and other risks	 Good	Good
Preventing fires and other risks	 Good	Requires improvement
Protecting the public through fire regulation	 Good	Requires improvement
Responding to fires and other emergencies	 Good	Inadequate
Responding to major and multi-agency incidents	 Good	Requires improvement
Question	This inspection	2018/19
 Efficiency	 Good	Requires improvement
Making best use of resources	 Good	Requires improvement
Future affordability	 Good	Requires improvement

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

HM Inspector's summary

It was a pleasure to visit Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service, and I am grateful for the positive and constructive way that the service engaged with our inspection.

We were pleased to see that the service has made significant progress since our 2018 inspection in how effectively and efficiently it keeps people safe and secure from fires and other risks. It has made clear use of our recommendations from the last inspection to improve the service it gives the public. But there are areas where the service still needs to improve, particularly how well it looks after its people.

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

- The service has positively responded to our [cause of concern](#) that it didn't have adequate resources available to respond effectively to emergencies. It now consistently makes sure enough fire engines are available and senior managers oversee this. It has also improved the way it uses its prevention and protection functions to keep the public safe and target resources at those most at risk.
- The service has used the change in governance arrangements to stabilise its financial position, both now and in the future. It has removed significant financial instability and has clear plans in place to provide an affordable fire and rescue service, while establishing a [reserves](#) strategy and capital funding to make essential investments.
- The service and its leadership team have a clear strategic intent to embed values and promote equality, diversity and inclusion. However, I am concerned to find that in many areas this is not translating into effective actions that people throughout the organisation understand and support. We have identified several areas where the service needs to improve the way it looks after its people. It has, however, fully resolved our cause of concern from 2018 where we identified it was not monitoring or recording risk-critical training.

Overall, I commend the service on the changes it has made and expect it to continue working to resolve the further areas for improvement we have identified. We will continue to assess progress through our usual monitoring arrangements.



Roy Wilsher

HM Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Service in numbers



Response

Northamptonshire

England

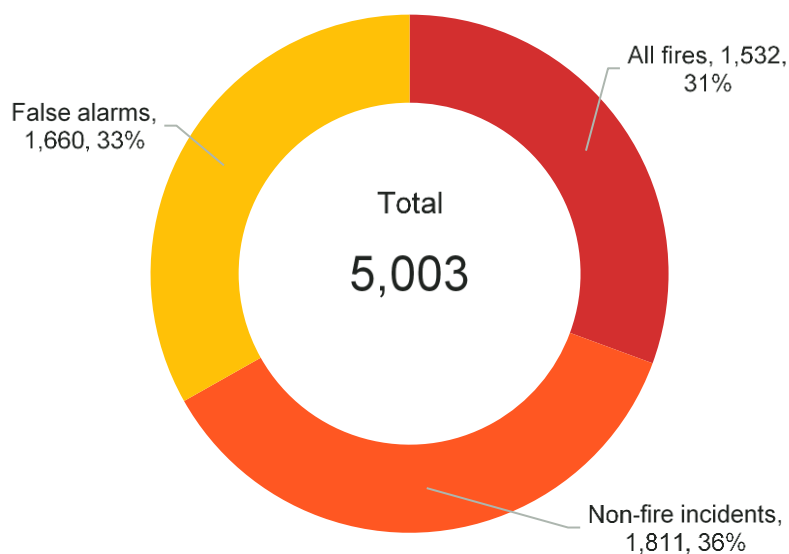
Incidents attended per 1,000 population Year ending 30 June 2021	6.61	9.36
Home fire safety checks carried out by fire and rescue service per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2021	2.31	4.47
Fire safety audits per 100 known premises Year ending 31 March 2021	4.51	1.70
Average availability of pumps Year ending 31 March 2021	76.6%	86.4%



Cost

Firefighter cost per person Year ending 31 March 2021	£19.88	£23.72
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Incidents attended in the year to 30 June 2021

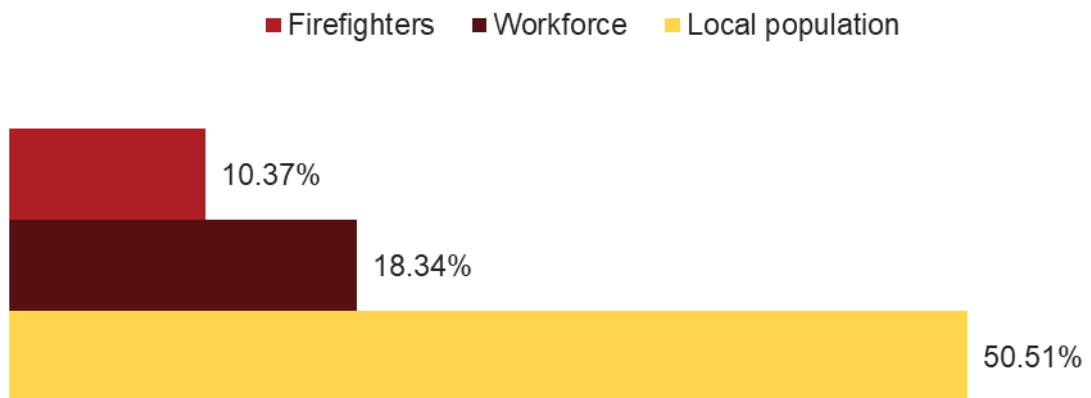




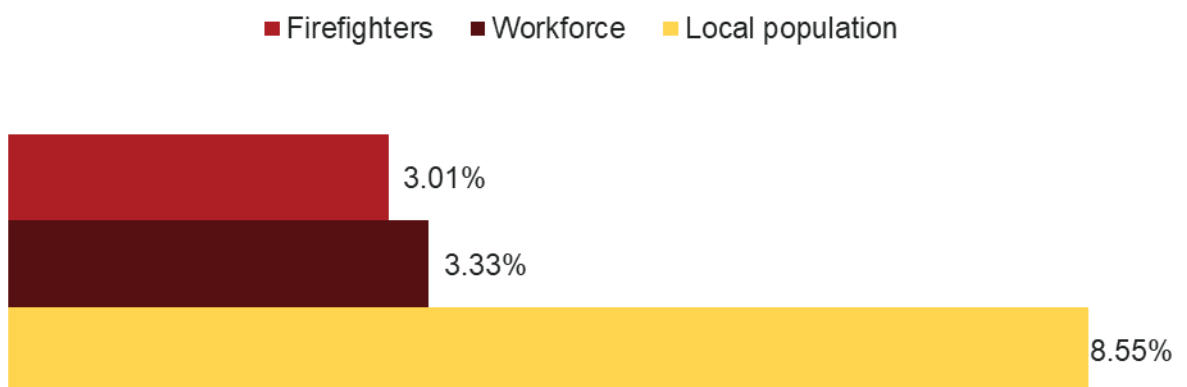
Workforce

	Northamptonshire	England
Five-year change in total workforce 2016 to 2021	-10.49%	-1.60%
Number of firefighters per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2021	0.57	0.62
Percentage of firefighters who are wholetime Year ending 31 March 2021	55.5%	64.4%

Percentage of population, firefighters and workforce who are female as at 31 March 2021



Percentage of population, firefighters and workforce who are from ethnic minority backgrounds as at 31 March 2021



For more information on data and analysis throughout this report, please view the [‘About the data’ section of our website](#).

Effectiveness



How effective is the service at keeping people safe and secure?



Good

Summary

An effective fire and rescue service will identify and assess the full range of foreseeable fire and rescue risks its community faces. It should target its fire prevention and protection activities to those who are at greatest risk from fire and make sure fire safety legislation is being enforced. And when the public calls for help, it should respond promptly with the right skills and equipment to deal with the incident effectively. Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service's overall effectiveness is good.

We are encouraged to see that the service has responded well to the areas for improvement we identified in our first inspection. Overall, we have seen a positive direction of travel.

The service has developed an effective [integrated risk management plan \(IRMP\)](#). It uses data and [intelligence](#) to identify a range of risks and it describes how it will mitigate them. It has effective processes in place to gather and disseminate risk information throughout the organisation.

Since our last inspection, the service has allocated more resources to its prevention function. This is now allowing it to mitigate the risks it has identified. It has evaluated its methodology for conducting [home fire safety checks](#) and adapted this to better target the highest risk in its communities. The service has effective relationships with a range of partner organisations. These allow it to [safeguard vulnerable people](#) and collaboratively reduce the number of fires and other emergencies.

In relation to protection, the service has undertaken a detailed review of its risk-based inspection programme (RBIP) to make sure this is more proportional. It now targets its activity at premises that present the highest risk. It has also responded to our last inspection by improving the way it engages informally with businesses to make sure they comply with fire safety legislation.

The service has taken appropriate action to address our [cause of concern](#) about its response capability. It now has sufficient resources available to give an emergency

response in line with its own performance standards. It has extensively reviewed these standards to make sure available resources meet risk and demand.

We found improvements in the service's capability to respond to major and multi-agency incidents. It has established effective plans to respond to incidents and it tests these plans regularly with other agencies and fire and rescue services. Staff now have a better understanding of [Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles \(JESIP\)](#) principles, although we still found that not all staff understand their role in responding to marauding terrorist attack incidents.

Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies



Good (2019: Good)

Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service is good at understanding risk.

Each fire and rescue service should identify and assess all foreseeable fire and rescue-related risks that could affect its communities. Arrangements should be put in place through the service's prevention, protection and response capabilities to prevent or mitigate these risks for the public.

Area for improvement

The service should ensure that consultation is meaningful in influencing its future plans and informing its risk profile.

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

The service uses a wide range of sources to identify risk

The service has assessed an appropriate range of risks and threats after a thorough IRMP planning process. When assessing risk, it has considered relevant information collected from a broad range of internal and external sources and data sets. For example, we were encouraged to see that the service is taking account of significant future housing expansion to adjust its planning assumptions.

The service has also produced the Fire25 document, which sets out a range of other factors that will influence its operating model. This includes recent changes in the local authority structure and guidance produced by the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#).

The service could improve the way it engages with communities to build its risk profile

The service carried out an extensive consultation before publishing its current IRMP, but it didn't sufficiently use the outcomes of this when constructing its IRMP.

At the time of our inspection, the service was consulting on the next version of its IRMP, which it intended to publish in April 2022. We found that the primary consultation method was an online survey promoted through the service's website and social media channels. The service has also conducted several online engagement events with parish councillors from across the county. These methods alone may not allow the service to capture the views of hard-to-reach sections of the community.

The service should ensure it fully considers the outcomes of the consultation in the next version of its IRMP or any subsequent action plans.

The service has an effective IRMP

After assessing relevant risks, the service has recorded its findings in an easily understood IRMP. This plan describes how prevention, protection and response activity is to be effectively resourced to mitigate or reduce the risks and threats the community faces, both now and in the future.

The latest version of the plan includes actions to:

- revise its targeting methodology for home fire safety visits (HFSVs);
- refine its RBIP; and
- provide an emergency response against clearly defined standards and target attendance times.

Three departmental strategies for prevention, protection and response support the IRMP. They explain the service's plans in more detail and include specific outcomes for measuring performance.

The service has good processes in place to share risk information across the organisation

The service routinely collects and updates the information it has about the people, places and threats it has identified as being at greatest risk. This information is readily available for the service's prevention, protection and response staff, which enables it to identify, reduce and mitigate risk effectively. The service holds a twice-weekly 'pacesetter' call involving staff from all departments, where they agree any newly identified risks and plans to mitigate them. This helps ensure a common understanding of risk across the organisation.

The service also communicates information to staff through a range of methods, including email, [mobile data terminals](#) on fire engines and alerts in the service's training software. Where appropriate, it passes risk information on to other organisations such as the police and local authorities.

The service uses local and national learning to inform its understanding of risk

The service records and communicates risk information effectively. It also routinely updates risk assessments and uses feedback from local and national operational activity to inform its planning assumptions.

The service uses its operational assurance board to effectively assess the outcomes of internal debriefs and national learning. It has considered both the Grenfell Tower

fire inquiry and the Manchester Arena inquiry and has developed actions to improve its own capability.

The service has responded proactively to the recommendations and learning from Phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower fire inquiry

During this round of inspections, we sampled how each fire and rescue service has responded to the recommendations and learning from Phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower fire inquiry.

Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service has responded positively and proactively to learning from this tragedy.

It has carried out a fire safety audit and collected and passed relevant risk information to its prevention, protection and response teams about buildings identified as high risk and all high-rise buildings within the service area.

The service has introduced new equipment specifically designed for evacuating people from high-rise fires. It has improved its procedures for providing fire survival guidance to 999 callers while communicating the information those callers give them to firefighters at the scene of an incident. It has also tested its high-rise procedures in several large, multi-agency exercises.

Preventing fires and other risks



Good (2019: Requires improvement)

Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service is good at preventing fires and other risks.

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

Area for improvement

The service should ensure that the new ways of working to provide HFSVs are fully understood by staff to best support the targeting of risk.

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

The service's prevention strategy is clearly linked to its IRMP

The service's prevention strategy is clearly linked to the risks identified in its IRMP. It is based on internal and external data, which it uses to determine who is at the greatest risk in its communities and how it will target its activity towards them.

The service works well with relevant organisations on prevention and it passes on relevant information when needed. Information is used to adjust planning assumptions and direct activity between the service's prevention, protection and response functions. For example, where prevention staff identify specific risks, such as hoarding or an immobile occupier, there is a process to update the [mobilising system](#) in [fire control](#). This ensures those at the address receive an amended response in the event of a fire.

The service has allocated additional resources to its prevention function

During our previous inspection we found that to make savings, the service had reduced its prevention team to seven staff members. This meant it didn't have enough capacity to address the risks it had identified. We are encouraged to find that the service has since taken steps to increase the size of its dedicated prevention team. This includes a post dedicated to supporting the highest-risk cases in liaison with partner organisations.

The effect of the pandemic on the service's prevention activities

We considered how the service had adapted its prevention work during our COVID-19 specific inspection in September 2020. At that time, we found it had adapted its public prevention work appropriately.

Since then, we are encouraged to find that the service resumed prevention activity on a risk-assessed basis and in accordance with national guidance. But at the time of our inspection the service had, based on the re-introduction of COVID-19 restrictions in December 2021, paused much of its prevention activity again. It was continuing to ensure it engaged with very high-risk cases and had a clear plan as to how it would resume activity once restrictions were lifted.

The service has reviewed its prevention activity to make sure it targets those most at risk

Prevention activity is clearly prioritised using a risk-based approach towards people most at risk from fire and other emergencies. We are pleased to see that since our last inspection, the service has developed a new approach to better target its HFSVs. This was introduced in July 2021 and is based on data from a range of sources. The information is presented in 'risk maps', which staff use to target activity in areas that present the greatest risk.

Between July and December 2021, the percentage of completed HFSVs scored to be in high or very high-risk dwellings had increased to 80 percent, compared with 60 percent in 2019/20. We are interested to see if this approach continues to result in effective targeting over a longer period.

The service should make sure staff know how to target risk

Staff told us they have the right skills and confidence to carry out HFSVs. This includes [on-call](#) firefighters, who we found in our last inspection were not engaged in carrying out prevention activity. These checks cover an appropriate range of hazards that can put vulnerable people at greater risk from fire and other emergencies.

But we were disappointed to find that not all operational staff know how to apply the newly introduced targeting methodology. The service should make sure staff understand this so it can fully realise the intended benefits.

Staff can confidently respond to safeguarding concerns

Staff we interviewed told us about occasions when they had identified safeguarding problems. They were familiar with how to identify vulnerable people and could explain the processes to make referrals to other organisations. Prevention staff responsible for the most complex cases complete joint training with the Northamptonshire Safeguarding Adults Board.

All member organisations of this board recently completed a self-assessment and assurance audit to verify independently if they were meeting the needs of vulnerable people. We heard from external partners that the service engaged fully in this process and achieved a good level of compliance.

The service works well with partner organisations

The service works with a wide range of other organisations such as Northamptonshire Police and local community safety partnerships to prevent fires and other emergencies. During our inspection we spoke to a range of partner organisations, who all talked positively of the relationship they have with the service.

We found good evidence that it routinely refers people at greatest risk to other organisations that may be better able to meet their needs. These organisations include social services and healthcare bodies. Arrangements are in place to receive referrals from others such as the East Midlands Ambulance Service. We found evidence that the service consistently acts appropriately on the referrals it receives, where appropriate giving enhanced support through its complex case officer.

The service routinely exchanges information with other public sector organisations about people and groups at greatest risk. It uses the information to challenge planning assumptions and target prevention activity. For example, the service works with Northamptonshire Police to share with each other information about [domestic abuse](#) and incidents of arson (these risks being linked in some cases).

The service has increased its focus on road safety

Since our last inspection, the service has improved its focus on road safety through enhanced co-operation with the Northamptonshire Safer Roads Alliance. Several other members of the alliance told us the service now proactively engages with partners, and that data is used to develop collaborative strategies to reduce the number of people killed or seriously injured on the county's roads.

The service works well with partners to tackle fire-setting

The service has a range of suitable and effective interventions to target and educate people of different ages who show signs of fire-setting behaviour. It is integrated into the Northamptonshire Arson Task Force, a joint body that employs staff from both the service and Northamptonshire Police. They jointly carry out a range of interventions, including bespoke arson risk visits and a juvenile fire-setter programme.

The service is a leading partner in the tri-service Emergency Services Cadets scheme, where 25 percent of places are reserved for young people from under-privileged backgrounds. This is intended to give young people activities that divert them from [anti-social behaviour](#) and contribute to the reduction of arson.

The service is good at evaluating its prevention activity

In our last inspection we identified that the service wasn't effectively evaluating its prevention activities. We are pleased to find that the service has since developed a tool for evaluating its prevention work, both internally and with partners. It measures how effective its work is so it knows what works, and so its communities get prevention activity that meets their needs.

We saw evidence of the service effectively evaluating relationships with its partners to make sure they achieve the desired outcomes. It has used this process well to improve outcomes for the public. It also evaluates its engagement with specific individuals who present complex needs. It shares this learning with its safeguarding management group to identify any areas for improvement.

Protecting the public through fire regulation



Good (2019: Requires improvement)

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

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

Area for improvement

The service should ensure its RBIP uses a systemised methodology that can be applied consistently in the future.

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

The service has a protection strategy that is linked to its IRMP

The service's protection strategy is clearly linked to the risk it has identified in its IRMP. It outlines several ways in which it will address risk in its communities. This includes both a RBIP that proactively targets risk, and a broad range of other activity to respond to public concerns and emerging risks.

Staff across the service are involved in this activity, with information effectively exchanged as needed. For example, the service has recently piloted a new approach to using operational crews to inspect [houses of multiple occupation](#). Information is in turn used to adjust planning assumptions and to direct activity between the service's protection, prevention and response functions. This means resources are properly aligned to risk.

The effect of the pandemic on the service's protection activities

We considered how the service had adapted its protection activity during our COVID-19 specific inspection in September 2020. At that time, we found it had adapted its protection work well. The revised approach of using remote audits to inspect premises has let the service carry out more audits than it would usually be able to. It has continued to re-introduce face-to-face protection activity on a risk-assessed basis and in accordance with national guidance.

The service has reviewed its strategy to better align activity to risk

In our last inspection we found that the service's RBIP was not proportionate. The service could also not undertake it with the resources it had available. We are pleased to find that the service has since completed a detailed review of its RBIP to make sure it focuses on the highest-risk buildings.

Its new approach has reduced the number of high-risk premises from more than 5,000 premises to 1,721. It reviews a range of internal and external data to determine which premises should be included, and it reviews this regularly.

But we do have some concerns that the arrangements in place to determine the inclusion of premises are over-reliant on the professional judgment of a small number of experienced protection officers. The service should make sure it designs systems to ensure the current arrangements can continue consistently in the future.

The service has the required resources to provide protection activity

The service has enough qualified protection staff to meet the requirements of the service's RBIP. It has the capacity to audit all premises in its RBIP on a three-yearly basis and undertake all other activity identified in its IRMP. This enables the service to provide the range of audit and enforcement activity needed, both now and in the future.

Staff get the right training and work to appropriate accreditation. Protection officers complete a [Level 4 fire safety diploma](#), which meets the requirements in National Fire Chiefs Council guidelines.

The service has carried out audits at all high-rise buildings

The service doesn't have any buildings in its area that use the type of cladding found on Grenfell Tower. It has, however, audited all high-rise buildings in the county as part of its response to the tragedy. It makes information it gathers during these audits available to response teams and control operators, helping them respond more effectively in an emergency.

The service completes audits in a systematic and consistent way

We reviewed a range of audits of different premises across the service. This includes audits:

- as part of the service's RBIP;
- after fires at premises where fire safety legislation applied; and
- where enforcement action had been taken.

The audits we reviewed were completed to a high standard in a consistent, systematic way, and in line with the service's policies. Relevant information from the audits is made available to operational teams and control room operators.

The service quality assures protection activities in a proportionate way. It reviews staff activities to make sure they meet the required standard.

The service evaluates its protection activity

We found evidence of the service continually evaluating its RBIP to ensure it continues to inspect the highest-risk premises. It also evaluates specific activities. For example, in 2020/21 the service trialled using operational staff to inspect houses of multiple occupation. At the end of a trial period, we found evidence of the service evaluating its approach and identifying learning that would improve the way it provides services in the future.

The service should ensure it has the capability to prosecute

We are encouraged to find that the service consistently uses a range of enforcement powers, but we are concerned that they haven't undertaken any recorded prosecutions. This may result in staff not having the knowledge and skills they need to successfully prosecute in the future. In the year to 31 March 2021, the service issued 15 informal notifications, 18 enforcement notices and 6 prohibition notices.

During our inspection we reviewed data and files for several enforcement and prohibition cases. We found that the service completes subsequent visits to ensure premises are taking sufficient action to improve compliance. Protection officers give 24/7 cover to support any out-of-hours enforcement requirements.

The service works closely with other organisations to regulate fire safety

The service works closely with other organisations to regulate fire safety and routinely exchanges risk information with them. Examples we found during our inspection include:

- a joined-up approach with Northamptonshire Police to inspect and manage compliance in licensed premises;
- effective relationships with local authority housing teams to inspect the large number of houses of multiple occupation in the county; and
- work with the Health and Safety Executive to undertake enforcement action at a construction site that was illegally being used for sleeping purposes.

The service responds to building consultations on time

The service responds to all building consultations on time, so consistently meets its statutory responsibility to comment on fire safety arrangements at new and altered buildings. In the year to 31 March 2021, it responded to 99.6 percent of consultations within the required timescales.

The service has improved the way it engages with businesses

In our last inspection we found that the service didn't engage effectively with local businesses on an informal level. We are pleased to find that the service has taken action to improve this.

It has developed a range of accessible self-help tools for landlords and business owners to help them comply with relevant legislation. These are published on the service's website, with contact details for the protection team. The service may wish to think about expanding the reach of this content through social media channels or engaging with businesses in person.

The service takes action to reduce unwanted fire signals

An effective risk-based approach is in place to manage the number of unwanted fire signals. The service has robust procedures to challenge calls in its control room before it mobilises a fire engine. And it has clear policies for working with premises that repeatedly generate false alarms. It gets fewer calls because of this work.

In the year ending 31 March 2021, the service didn't attend 63 percent of all alarm activations it was notified of. This is significantly higher than the England average of 37 percent. Fewer unwanted calls means fire engines are available to respond to a genuine incident rather than responding to a false one. It also reduces the risk to the public if fewer fire engines travel at high speed on the roads.

Responding to fires and other emergencies



Good (2019: Inadequate)

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

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

Area for improvement

The service should make sure its mobile data terminals are reliable so firefighters can readily access up-to-date risk information.

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

Response resources are in the right places to meet risk and demand

The service's response strategy is linked to the risks identified in its IRMP. Its fire engines and response staff, as well as its working patterns, are designed and located to enable the service to respond flexibly to fires and other emergencies with the appropriate resources. The service completed a detailed fire cover review in 2019. This has allowed it to better understand how many fire engines it needs and assure itself they are in the right places to best respond to emergencies.

The service has improved the availability of its fire engines

In our inspection of 2018, we identified a cause of concern that the service consistently didn't have available its minimum number of fire engines. There was also a lack of oversight as senior managers were not routinely told when this happened.

We are pleased to find the service has taken significant action to address this. It has increased the number of [wholetime firefighters](#) to give additional support to on-call stations. And it uses overtime where necessary to maintain the optimum number of fire engines. The service holds a twice-weekly 'pacesetter' call, where senior managers review resource availability and agree actions to make sure the service maintains coverage.

To support its response strategy, the service aims to have 18 fire engines available on 100 percent of occasions. The service consistently meets this standard and uses its fire cover model to make sure these fire engines are in the most suitable locations. In the year to 31 March 2021, the service maintained overall availability for its fire engines of 76.6 percent. This results in an average of 21 appliances being available.

Improved availability is resulting in better response times

There are no national response standards of performance for the public. But the service has set out its own response standards in its IRMP. It aims to respond to all incidents within 10 minutes of receiving a 999 call.

In the year to 31 March 2021, the service's average response time was 10 minutes and 17 seconds, so not meeting its own target by a small margin. But Home Office data shows that in the same period, the service's average response time to [primary fires](#) was 9 minutes and 39 seconds. This is in line with the average for significantly rural services. Since 2018/19, when we identified our cause of concern about fire engine availability, response times have continued to improve.

Staff have a good understanding of how to command incidents safely

The service has trained incident commanders, who are assessed regularly and properly. It has an effective system to ensure they have regular training and it re-assesses their command competence every two years. This enables the service to safely, assertively and effectively manage the whole range of incidents that it could face, from small and routine ones to complex multi-agency incidents.

As part of our inspection, we interviewed incident commanders from across the service. Those we interviewed are familiar with risk assessing, decision-making and recording information at incidents in line with national best practice, as well as the JESIP. Some staff told us that although they had received training on the subject, they were unsure how to apply [operational discretion](#) at an incident. The service should consider how it can give more guidance in this area.

The service is making good progress to ensure its operational procedures are aligned to [national operational guidance](#).

Fire control is involved in the service's command, exercise and assurance activity, as well as debriefing

We are pleased to see the service's control staff are integrated into the service's command, training and exercise programme. Control staff follow a continuous training programme, which is in line with national competencies. They are regularly involved in multi-agency exercises. Following exercises or larger incidents, control staff can contribute to operational learning through the service's debriefing system.

Fire control can give fire survival guidance to multiple callers

The control room staff we interviewed are confident they could provide fire survival guidance to many callers simultaneously. This was identified as learning for fire services after the Grenfell Tower fire. A recent high-rise exercise tested their ability to manage multiple fire survival calls and share information with incident commanders. Staff told us they were confident in using this process.

Control has good systems in place to exchange real-time risk information with incident commanders, other responding partners and other supporting fire and rescue services. Maintaining good situational awareness enables the service to communicate effectively with the public, providing them with accurate and tailored advice. Information on the specific evacuation policy for each high-rise building in the county is clearly displayed in the mobilising system.

The service's mobilising software is fully integrated with the control room of Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service. This allows the Warwickshire service to seamlessly handle an increase in call volume with no delay to mobilising or to communicating information.

The quality of risk information is good but it is not always easily accessible

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

The information we reviewed was up to date, detailed and in a format that is easy to access and understand. But staff told us the hardware used to provide this information on mobile data terminals in fire engines is often unreliable. On occasions during our inspection, we also found difficulties in accessing risk information. The service must make sure mobile data terminals are reliable.

The risk information viewed by inspectors was subject to input from the service's prevention, protection and response functions when appropriate.

The service has improved the way it evaluates operational performance

During our inspection in 2018, we identified that the service should make sure it has an effective system to help staff use learning and debriefing to improve operational response. This was an area for improvement. We are pleased to find that the service has taken action to address this. It has consulted with other fire and rescue services to identify best practice and implement a new system for debriefing.

As part of this inspection, we reviewed a range of emergency incidents and training events. These included large fires, exercises and a case of wide-area flooding, which was declared a major incident. We are pleased to see the service routinely follows its policies to make sure staff command incidents in line with operational guidance. We found extensive evidence of actions being identified in debriefs and the service responding to improve the way it serves the public.

Encouragingly, most staff spoke positively of the new system and told us they usually receive a timely response acknowledging any suggested improvements or learning they submit.

The service is effective at keeping the public informed about incidents

The service has good systems in place to inform the public about ongoing incidents and help keep them safe during and after incidents. It uses various social media channels to issue live updates about significant incidents. A 24/7 arrangement through Northamptonshire Police means communications continue out of hours.

The service has additional processes in place with the [local resilience forum \(LRF\)](#) to share information about major incidents. It also gives senior operational commanders bespoke training on media liaison.

Responding to major and multi-agency incidents



Good (2019: Requires improvement)

Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service is good at responding to major and multi-agency incidents.

All fire and rescue services must be able to respond effectively to multi-agency and cross-border incidents. This means working with other fire and rescue services (known as intraoperability) and emergency services (known as interoperability).

Area for improvement

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

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

The service has assessed community risks likely to need a multi-agency response

The service has effectively anticipated and considered the reasonably foreseeable risks and threats it may face. These risks are listed in both local and national risk registers as part of its IRMP planning. Examples include wide-scale flooding, major fires and flu pandemics.

Firefighters have access to risk information from neighbouring services. This is provided through mobile data terminals on fire engines and now includes premises up to 10 kilometres from the county borders. This addresses an area for improvement we identified in our 2018 inspection.

The service has plans in place to respond to multi-agency incidents

We reviewed the arrangements the service has in place to respond to different major incidents. The service is integrated into a joint operations team, which also employs staff from Northamptonshire Police. Together, they prepare plans for both agencies to respond to major incidents and risks in the service area.

The service has good arrangements in place, including a comprehensive major incident procedure, which staff understand well. We found they know their responsibilities, including how to request specialist resources and national assets if needed.

We saw evidence of the service using its major incident procedures effectively during a wide-scale flooding incident in December 2020. The service worked well with other agencies to put in place an effective command structure and facilitated a multi-agency debrief to identify learning.

Not all staff understand how to respond to marauding terrorist attacks

Since our last inspection, the service has revised its procedures to respond to a marauding terrorist attack. These reflect revised national guidance. But we found that not all staff understand their responsibilities in relation to the procedures. The service should ensure all operational staff are prepared and trained well enough for this type of incident.

The service works effectively with other fire services

The service supports other fire and rescue services responding to emergency incidents. Its joint fire control system with Warwickshire allows seamless cross-border mobilising in this area of the county, making sure incidents receive the quickest response. It is intraoperable with these services and can form part of a multi-agency response.

The service has established processes in place to resource and deploy national assets in the event of a major incident elsewhere in the country. We found evidence of the service robustly testing the deployment procedures for its mass decontamination unit as part of a national resilience assurance team visit.

The service has a structured cross-border exercise plan

In our last inspection, we identified that the service needed to arrange a programme of cross-border exercises. We are encouraged to see this is now in place and the service has an exercise plan with neighbouring fire and rescue services. This means they can work together effectively to keep the public safe. The plan includes the risks of major events, when the service could foreseeably give support or ask for help from neighbouring services.

Between April 2021 and January 2022, the service completed 21 multi-agency exercises, ten of which involved staff from neighbouring fire and rescue services.

Although we have seen evidence of the service using a structured plan to co-ordinate this programme, it should consider how to make sure the staff involved in these exercises are those who are most likely to respond to incidents with other fire services. Some staff who work close to county borders, particularly at on-call stations, told us they have little or no experience of exercising with other services.

Incident commanders have been trained in and understand JESIP

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

The service gave us strong evidence that it consistently follows these principles. Examples include:

- using [national inter-agency liaison officers](#) to support commanders with tactical advice during multi-agency incidents;
- communication procedures that can be adopted during major incidents, for example, joint airwave channels; and
- using nationally recognised messaging protocols (that is, messages that all emergency services and partner agencies understand).

The service is an active member of the LRF

The service has good arrangements in place to respond to emergencies with other partners that make up the Northamptonshire LRF.

The service is a valued partner. The chief fire officer is the chair of the LRF and leads both the strategic and tactical sub-groups. These sub-groups have had frequent meetings during the pandemic to support an effective county-wide response. The service takes part in regular training events with other members of the LRF and uses the learning to develop planning assumptions about responding to major and multi-agency incidents.

The service uses national learning to inform planning

The service keeps itself up to date with [national operational learning](#) updates from other fire services and joint operational learning from other blue light partners, such as the police service and ambulance trusts. The service has an operational assurance board, which oversees this process. The board makes sure the service uses learning to inform planning assumptions both internally and with other partner agencies.

Efficiency



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



Good

Summary

An efficient fire and rescue service will manage its budget and use its resources properly and appropriately. It will align its resources to the risks and priorities identified in its [integrated risk management plan \(IRMP\)](#). It should try to achieve value for money and keep costs down without compromising public safety. It should make the best possible use of its resources to achieve better results for the public. Plans should be based on robust and realistic assumptions about income and costs. Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service's overall efficiency is good.

We are pleased to find that since our last inspection, the service has made significant progress in improving its efficiency. The change in governance and additional support from central government has allowed it to stabilise and secure its financial position, both now and in the future. It has successfully established an adequate level of [reserves](#) and can demonstrate a balanced budget over the duration of its [medium-term financial plan \(MTFP\)](#).

The service has a clear rationale when allocating resources to its prevention, protection and response functions. This is clearly linked to risks identified in its IRMP. The service then uses a strong performance management framework to ensure these resources perform efficiently against objectives in the IRMP.

The governance change has actively introduced new opportunities for collaboration. These have given the service the capacity and capability it needs to modernise the organisation. A joint enabling services function with Northamptonshire Police now provides functions including fleet, estates and information and communications technology (ICT). The service should make sure it comprehensively monitors, reviews and evaluates the benefits of this collaboration.

Notably, we found that the service's ICT infrastructure is not fit for purpose and is significantly hampering staff productivity. The service has plans in place to address this, but it should make sure this continues to be an important priority.

Making best use of resources



Good (2019: Requires improvement)

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

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

The service's budget for 2022/23 is £27.092m. This is a 7.25 percent increase from the previous financial year.

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

Allocation of resources is linked directly to the IRMP

We are encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since our last inspection. The service's financial and workforce plans, including allocating staff to prevention, protection and response, now reflect and are consistent with the risks and priorities identified in the IRMP. For example:

- the allocation of resources to the response function is clearly linked to the outcomes of the service's 2019 fire cover review;
- the increase in prevention resources has been supported by business cases that outline why this is necessary to meet the risks identified in the IRMP; and
- the provision of protection resources reflects the demand and activity detailed in the IRMP.

We found evidence of the service's [fire control](#) being inadequately resourced. It frequently operates with less than the required number of staff. But the service had recently taken steps to address this with improved succession planning. It should make sure it maintains these improvements.

Plans are built on sound scenarios and use a [zero-based budgeting](#) principle to allocate resources based on current need, as opposed to assuming previous spending should continue. These plans help make sure the service is sustainable. And they are underpinned by financial controls that reduce the risk of misusing public money. This is supported by external audits, which identified no areas of concern.

The service monitors performance effectively

We are pleased to see that the service's arrangements for managing performance clearly link resource use to the IRMP and the service's strategic priorities. We found that since our last inspection, the service has introduced an effective performance framework, which staff understand well. Teams throughout the organisation use scorecards to report their work against specific targets. Managers at all levels of the service told us the scorecard system helps them make sure their team's time is as productive as possible and meets the organisation's objectives.

The service is taking some other steps to make sure the workforce's time is productive. This includes implementing new ways of working. For example, it has introduced a new crewing model at two fire stations, which is designed to better support on-call availability.

In our 2018 inspection, we identified that the service needed to make sure it had clear and robust processes to manage staff overtime. We are pleased to find it has now introduced effective measures to make sure it only uses overtime when it is needed to meet operational requirements.

Poor ICT infrastructure hampers the productivity of staff

Throughout our inspection, staff told us their productivity was significantly reduced by the available IT systems and hardware. This is particularly the case at the service's fire stations. Examples include:

- software applications that haven't been sufficiently updated, resulting in staff developing time-consuming workarounds that also create single points of failure;
- a lack of computers fitted with video conferencing software, meaning staff are less able to access training courses; and
- using paper-based recording systems, which need to be duplicated to communicate information to others in the organisation.

We acknowledge that the service has an ambitious plan to develop the way it provides technology and IT through its joint enabling services function. It should make sure it prioritises this work to improve its teams' output and productivity.

The service collaborates extensively to improve its efficiency

Since our last inspection, and following the change of governance, the service has entered an extensive collaboration with Northamptonshire Police and the Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner. Named 'enabling services', it provides joint back-office functions across five areas. These are:

- finance;
- fleet and equipment;
- ICT;
- estates; and
- human resources.

These collaborative teams have been introduced gradually over the last two years and are all supported by detailed business cases and strategies, which outline how they will result in efficiencies and improve the effectiveness of the service.

We found that the service has plans to introduce performance indicators in April 2022 to measure the output of these teams. It should make sure it implements this process so it comprehensively monitors, reviews and evaluates the outcomes of the collaboration.

Collaborative working, particularly with the police, is also evident across prevention, protection and response functions. There are several joint teams, which include staff from both organisations, all aiming to improve outcomes for the public of Northamptonshire.

The service has good business continuity arrangements

We are encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since the last inspection. The service has good continuity arrangements in place for areas where threats and risks are considered high. These threats and risks are regularly reviewed and tested so that staff are aware of the arrangements and their associated responsibilities. For example, it has a clear plan outlining how it would carry out its statutory functions in the event of industrial action. It also has robust procedures should its fire control room become compromised. It regularly reviews and tests these procedures.

The service takes some action to ensure value for money

During our inspection we found some evidence of the service working to improve value for money and reduce non-pay costs. Examples include:

- promoting better scrutiny by improving the way it governs its procurement process and reducing the thresholds for authorising spend;
- introducing a new software tool to better monitor vehicle use and fuel consumption; and
- jointly procuring external data with Northamptonshire Police to inform risk identification and activity in its prevention and protection functions.

The service could do more to demonstrate value for money. For example, we found no evidence that the service uses national and local [benchmarking](#).

Some of the savings and efficiencies made under the service's former governance arrangements had a disproportionate effect on operational performance. The governance change has increased the funding available to the service, allowing it to improve the level of service it gives the public.

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



Good (2019: Requires improvement)

Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service is good at making the service affordable now and in the future.

Fire and rescue services should continuously look for ways to improve their effectiveness and efficiency. This includes transforming how they work and improving their value for money. Services should have robust spending plans that reflect future financial challenges and efficiency opportunities, and they should invest in better services for the public.

Area for improvement

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

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

The service has stabilised its financial position

We are encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since the last inspection. Following its exit from county council governance, the service was in a position of significant financial risk. It has taken extensive steps to address this, including lobbying central government to increase its funding. This has resulted in a stabilised position on which it has been able to develop secure plans for the future. Its MTFP now results in a balanced budget.

The underpinning assumptions in the MTFP are relatively robust, realistic and prudent. They take account of the wider external environment and some scenario planning for future spending reductions. These include changes in council tax income and potential increases in costs associated with the pension scheme.

Despite the challenges it has faced, and the need to increase its budget to improve operational performance, we are pleased to see that the service has continued to identify savings to be made over the course of its MTFP. The chief fire officer and leadership team have been involved in developing these proposals. They told us they believe the forecasted savings that need to be found within operational areas are achievable.

The service has established reserves and has a clear strategy to manage them

At the time of our last inspection, the service didn't have any financial reserves, a capital plan or any capital funding. Encouragingly, the service has since met its own objective of establishing an adequate level of general reserves within three years of the governance change.

The service has a sensible and sustainable plan for using its reserves. Of the £4.433m planned reserves at 31 March 2022, £2.433m of this is earmarked for essential capital investment and budgetary risks during 2022/23. This includes a range of investments in fleet, estates and ICT, which have all been subject to long-term lack of spend under the previous governance arrangements.

The service is beginning to introduce change in its fleet and estates

In our last inspection we identified that the service needed robust plans to consider the future management of its fleet and properties. The service has since developed plans to introduce change in both these areas.

There are strategies in place that are beginning to reverse the previous under-investment, including:

- procuring eight new fire engines and an aerial appliance to replace assets past their end of life;
- developing a detailed plan to carry out urgent remedial work and modifications at fire stations in the next three years; and
- developing a joint police and fire fleet workshop.

As the service moves into its next IRMP in April 2022 and conducts further reviews of its operational response model, it should ensure the fleet and estates strategies are linked closely to the reviews' outcomes.

The service's collaborative work is improving its capacity for future change

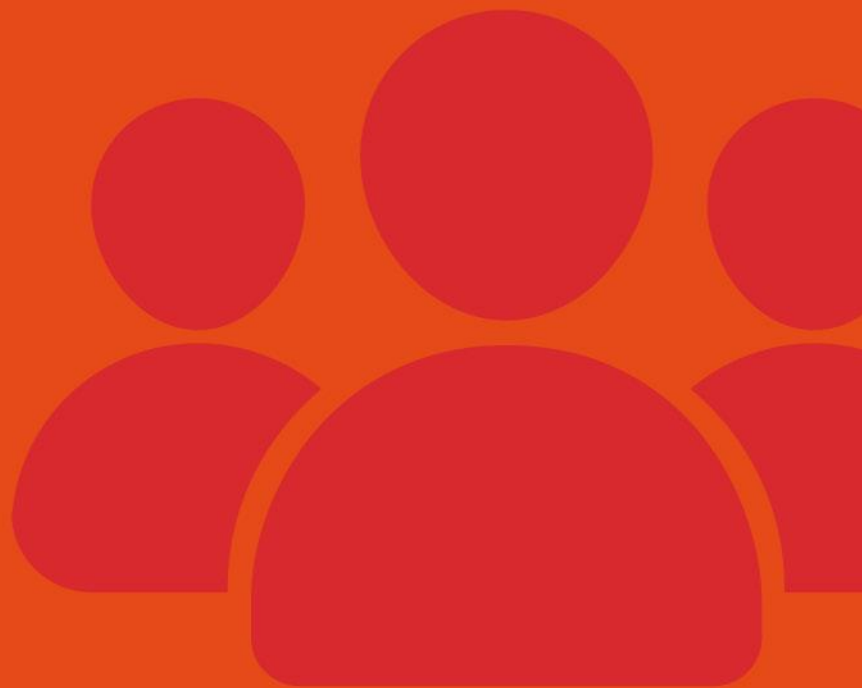
The service has put in place the capacity and capability needed to achieve sustainable transformation, and it routinely seeks opportunities to work with others to improve efficiency and provide better services in the future. For example, the joint human resources (HR) team within enabling services now contains seven HR advisors with different areas of expertise. Before November 2021, a single HR business partner supported the entire service. This is just one example of the way the collaboration has improved capacity and access to a workforce with a greater range of skills.

Since our last inspection, the enabling services function has developed a detailed ICT strategy. Its aim is to help the service exploit changes in technology to improve its efficiency and effectiveness. But many of these projects are in their early stages and are yet to bring the necessary improvements. The service has been focusing on improving infrastructure (for example, servers) with detailed plans to be put in place over the coming years. This should be an area of priority for the service.

The service is beginning to consider opportunities for income generation

The service considers options for generating extra income, but its ambition and track record in securing extra income is limited. It has developed a draft commercial strategy and has committed to a £25,000 income generation target for the year 2023/24.

People



How well does the service look after its people?



Requires improvement

Summary

A well-led fire and rescue service develops and maintains a workforce that is supported, professional, resilient, skilled, flexible and diverse. The service's leaders should be positive role models, and this should be reflected in the behaviour of staff at all levels. All staff should feel supported and be given opportunities to develop. Equality, diversity and inclusion are part of everything the service does and its staff understand their role in promoting it. Overall, Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at looking after its people.

The service has taken some action to respond to the areas we identified in our first inspection, but it still needs to make significant improvements.

Senior leaders show strong strategic intent to improve the culture, embed values and promote EDI. But the service isn't making enough progress in this area. We found that it is failing to implement the objectives outlined in its strategies to make sure it effectively looks after its people. Staff widely misunderstand the benefits of a diverse workforce. Despite a high proportion of staff members understanding the service's values, there are still examples of behaviours that are contrary to those values.

The service has a range of appropriate policies and procedures to manage workforce concerns such as grievances and disciplines. But it inconsistently applies these policies and there are managers throughout the organisation who don't understand them.

Since our last inspection, the service has made some improvements to its promotion process. This is now more structured and has improved staff members' understanding and perception of fairness. It could still take more action to identify and develop high-potential leaders to meet its long-term needs.

The service has positively responded to our [cause of concern](#) about its processes to provide, record and monitor risk-critical training. It now has appropriate systems in place to make sure skills are maintained and that there is effective corporate oversight of this process.

Promoting the right values and culture



Requires improvement (2019: Good)

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

Fire and rescue services should have positive and inclusive cultures, modelled by the behaviours of their senior leaders. Health and safety should be promoted effectively, and staff should have access to a range of wellbeing support that can be tailored to their individual needs.

Areas for improvement

- The service should make sure it has effective absence and attendance procedures in place.
- The service should formally monitor overtime and secondary contracts to make sure working hours are not exceeded.
- The service should assure itself that middle managers are visible and demonstrate service values through their behaviours.

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

Service values are not fully embedded

The service has well-defined values, which staff know. In our staff survey, 97 percent (193 of 200) of respondents were aware of the service's statement of values. The service is making progress in embedding the new national [Core Code of Ethics](#). We heard how it is integrating the code into policies, training and performance conversations.

Despite this, values are not translating into an effective culture throughout the organisation. We found that the visibility and approachability of managers varied across the service. Some staff members told us that if an issue could not be resolved locally, they would not feel comfortable approaching middle managers with a problem at work.

Through our staff survey, 38 percent (73 of 193) of respondents said senior leaders don't consistently model and maintain service values. Although many staff told us during the inspection that they are individually prepared to challenge unacceptable behaviour, we also heard examples of situations that the service hadn't resolved. The results of our staff survey showed that 44 percent (87 of 200) of respondents felt unable to challenge freely.

Staff can access services to support mental and physical health

The service continues to have effective wellbeing policies in place that are available to staff. A significant range of wellbeing support is available to support both physical and mental health. The service's outsourced occupational health unit and several other external providers can give specialist support. It has also introduced an internal wellbeing team. This is made up of staff from across the organisation who have all trained as mental health first aiders and give support to colleagues, particularly following exposure to traumatic incidents. Most staff we spoke to were overwhelmingly positive of the benefits the welfare team has brought about.

In our 2018 inspection, we found that although wellbeing provisions were in place, not all staff understood how to access them. The service has made good progress to improve this and to actively promote the way it supports staff wellbeing. This includes making information available through internal communication networks and displaying it in buildings. In our survey, 95 percent (189 of 200) of respondents told us they feel able to access services to support mental wellbeing. To ensure these provisions remain effective, the service should make sure it holds wellbeing conversations with all staff; 31 percent (62 of 200) of respondents told us they discussed their health and wellbeing with their manager less than once a year or not at all.

There is a positive culture of health and safety management

The service continues to have effective and well understood health and safety policies and procedures in place. It uses a systematic approach to report, record and investigate accidents and [near misses](#). We found examples of the service positively using the learning and recommendations from investigations to inform future practice and reduce the likelihood of re-occurrences.

These policies and procedures are readily available and effectively promoted to all staff. It also makes sure all staff receive a basic level of health and safety training, and those with line management responsibilities must complete an Institution of Occupational Safety and Health course. Our survey showed that 90 percent (179 of 200) of respondents felt their personal safety and welfare is treated seriously at work.

The service also robustly manages the fitness testing of operational staff and has procedures in place to support those who don't meet the required benchmark.

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

The service doesn't effectively monitor staff who have secondary employment or dual contracts to make sure they comply with the secondary employment policy and don't work excessive hours. It has procedures in place to make sure staff have enough rest between duties, but it doesn't have a system in place to monitor the total hours they work. During our inspection we saw evidence of an audit the service had recently completed of overtime hours. But this wasn't a structured or regular process. It also didn't consider dual-role contract staff.

The service doesn't consistently apply its absence management procedures

As part of our inspection, we reviewed some case files to consider how the service manages and supports staff through absence.

The service has an absence policy, but staff and managers don't widely understand it. From the files we reviewed, we saw several inconsistent decisions made because of lack of guidance or because managers hadn't used their discretion well. Managers don't always follow policy. For example, they don't always complete return to work interviews or make occupational health referrals, even for long-term absences. The way managers keep in touch with employees during periods of absence is inconsistent and subject to no formal recording in many cases.

Getting the right people with the right skills



Good (2019: Inadequate)

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

Fire and rescue services should have a workforce plan in place that is linked to their [integrated risk management plans \(IRMPs\)](#), sets out their current and future skills requirements and addresses capability gaps. They should supplement this with a culture of continuous improvement that includes appropriate learning and development throughout the service.

Area for improvement

The service should assure itself that staff with managerial responsibilities are appropriately trained for their role.

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

Workforce planning ensures the required skills and capabilities are available

In our 2018 inspection we identified that the service didn't have a workforce plan in place and that training plans weren't linked to the IRMP. The service now has a workforce strategy that assesses succession planning and establishment requirements. It translates this into plans for recruitment, training and promotion. The workforce plan is based on various scenarios, particularly relating to possible variations in the retirement profile. This makes sure skills and capabilities align with what is needed to effectively deliver the IRMP.

Workforce and succession planning is subject to consistent scrutiny in the form of regular meetings to discuss requirements. This involves managers from across the organisation. The service may wish to consider how it could better use these meetings to make sure its on-call stations have the right skills and capabilities. We found evidence of a lack of skills (for example, fire engine drivers) inhibiting operational performance. There was no clear plan to resolve these problems either locally or through the establishment meeting.

Most staff told us they can access the training they need to be effective in their role. The service's training plans make sure they can maintain competence and capability effectively. Of the staff who responded to our survey, 73 percent (145 of 200) agreed they have received sufficient training to effectively do their job.

The service has improved the way it records and monitors risk-critical training

Our last inspection identified a cause of concern that the service didn't have systems in place to effectively provide, record and monitor risk-critical training. We are pleased to find it has made significant progress in this area.

The service uses a single electronic system to monitor staff competence. It records centrally provided training (for example, breathing apparatus refreshers), e-learning and station-based maintenance of competence. Both operational and non-operational staff use the system.

The service regularly updates its understanding of staff members' skills and risk-critical safety capabilities through a dashboard tool, where managers have a clear view of any outstanding training needs. This is reviewed at a competency board, which forms part of the service's performance management framework. This approach means the service can identify gaps in workforce capabilities and resilience. This helps it make sound and financially sustainable decisions about current and future needs.

Throughout our inspection we found that managers were confident in the system and actively used it to maintain their teams' skills and capabilities. We reviewed a range of training records and found that compliance with training frequencies is very high. For example, of all the files we reviewed for wearing breathing apparatus in live fire conditions, 100 percent of employees had completed the training within the required timescale. This was replicated across a range of skills.

The service provides a range of learning and development resources

A culture of continuous improvements is promoted throughout the service and staff are encouraged to learn and develop.

We are pleased to see that the service has a range of learning and development resources in place. Although operational, prevention and protection staff receive adequate training, we heard that not all non-operational staff have access to the same opportunities as their colleagues. Of the staff who responded to our survey, 39 percent (78 of 200) told us that they aren't satisfied with the learning and development opportunities available to them.

The service has recently increased the leadership and management training it gives its supervisory and middle managers. Through [continuing professional development](#) sessions, it covers subjects such as grievance processes, workplace diversity and talent conversations. But not all staff have attended these sessions and some managers told us they have never had any form of leadership and management training. This was reflected in our findings around how well the service resolves workforce concerns.

The service should make sure it has a structure in place to ensure all managers receive the necessary training to perform their role, in particular the application of HR policies and procedures.

Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity



Requires improvement (2019: Requires improvement)

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

Creating a more representative workforce will provide huge benefits for fire and rescue services. This includes greater access to talent and different ways of thinking, and improved understanding of and engagement with their local communities. Each service should make sure equality, diversity and inclusion are firmly understood and demonstrated throughout the organisation. This includes successfully taking steps to remove inequality and making progress to improve fairness, diversity and inclusion at all levels of the service. It should proactively seek and respond to feedback from staff and make sure any action taken is meaningful.

Cause of concern

The service hasn't made enough progress since the last inspection to improve EDI.

Recommendations

By 31 August 2022, the service should develop an action plan to:

- engage with its staff to develop clear EDI objectives and training to increase awareness of EDI and its importance across the organisation, including understanding and addressing the impact positive action is having on staff;
- make sure it has robust processes in place to undertake equality impact assessments and review any actions agreed as a result;
- make improvements to the way it collects equality data to better understand its workforce demographic and needs; and
- support staff and managers to confidently challenge and manage inappropriate behaviour.

Areas for improvement

- The service should make sure that policies used to handle grievance and discipline cases are applied in a consistent and timely manner across the workforce, that staff have confidence in the process, and that those involved in these processes are appropriately trained.
- The service should make sure problems identified through staff feedback mechanisms are appropriately addressed and that actions it takes are communicated to staff in a timely way.

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

The service seeks feedback from staff, but this is not always meaningful

Since our last inspection, the service has developed several ways to engage with staff on issues and decisions that affect them. This includes methods to build all-staff awareness of fairness and diversity, as well as targeted engagement to identify matters that affect different staff groups. Members of the leadership team visit fire stations regularly and the chief fire officer hosts a monthly video conferencing call, which all staff members can join.

We found during our inspection that some staff are able to openly share ideas in these forums. But we also found the feedback methods don't have credibility with some of the workforce. Also, leaders don't consistently give feedback in response to suggestions. The results of our staff survey showed that 52 percent (103 of 200) of respondents don't feel confident in the mechanisms for giving feedback. For example, even though staff trialling a new variable crewing system at two fire stations have been involved in extensive consultation exercises, we heard that the service hasn't responded to many of the issues raised.

The service doesn't consistently resolve workforce concerns

The service should improve staff understanding of bullying, harassment and discrimination, including their duty to eliminate them. In our staff survey, 17 percent (34 of 200) of respondents told us they had been subject to harassment and 24 percent (48 of 200) to discrimination over the past 12 months. Of these staff, only 25 percent thought reporting their concerns had led to or would lead to a meaningful response.

The service has clear policies and procedures in place. But we found that where behaviours were robustly challenged, it was usually because of senior leadership involvement. Overall, we found that staff have limited confidence in the service's ability to deal effectively with cases of bullying, harassment and discrimination or other grievances. Many do not view the process as confidential or impartial. During our inspection we found inconsistencies in the way the service applied policies, for example:

- cases raised with supervisory and middle managers take a disproportionate amount of time to resolve;

- staff don't always understand the outcomes of grievances and how they can appeal;
- staff don't always feel they receive sufficient welfare support while going through the process; and
- it is unclear how the service makes sure the outcomes of investigations are consistent and proportionate.

The service should make sure it applies the contents of its policies more consistently in all cases. It should appropriately train those involved, and its HR function should give them appropriate levels of support and expertise.

The workforce doesn't understand the purpose and benefits of diversity

The service takes some action to understand and remove the risk of disproportionality in recruitment processes. For example, it has a reasonable adjustments policy, which it applies throughout selection processes. We found evidence of the service using it well in a promotions process.

The service undertakes some positive action to make sure its processes are fair and accessible to candidates from a range of backgrounds. Staff from across the service were involved in a range of targeted events before its most recent [wholetime firefighter](#) recruitment campaign.

In our 2018 inspection we found that staff didn't understand the benefits of positive action or a diverse workforce. Disappointingly, this continues to be the case. Throughout our inspection we consistently found that operational staff don't support the service's efforts to improve workforce diversity. We heard several examples of staff using gender-inappropriate and unacceptable language to describe the service's work in this area. Many staff we spoke to incorrectly believe the service lowers its entry standards to recruit individuals with specific [protected characteristics](#). Some were explicitly not supportive of positive action events. The service needs to do more to make sure its existing staff understand and support the action it is taking.

The service has made some progress to improve gender diversity for all staff in the organisation. At 31 March 2021, 18 percent of the workforce were women. The England average at that date was also 18 percent. The figure for Northamptonshire is a 10 percent increase since our last inspection. The service can't accurately say how well its workforce represents the residential population from minority ethnic backgrounds as it doesn't hold ethnicity data for a high proportion of its workforce. Of the service's staff members, 37.6 percent haven't declared their ethnicity to the service (against an England average of 9 percent).

The service knows it needs to go further to increase workforce diversity, especially in middle and senior management roles. But it is unclear what plans the service has in place to address this. We found no evidence of any positive action taking place in the latest [watch](#) and station manager promotion processes.

The service is making slow progress in implementing improvements to EDI

The service needs to improve its approach to EDI. Senior leaders show a strong strategic intent and there is a detailed strategy in place, but this isn't yet resulting in the improvements the service needs. It has taken steps to establish a staff network group, but it isn't using this to its fullest extent. Much of the service's work focuses on gender equality, as opposed to the full range of protected characteristics.

Although the service has a process in place to assess equality impact, the impact on each protected characteristic isn't properly assessed or acted on. We reviewed various equality impact assessments, which were poor in quality and detail. The service hadn't consulted with the staff network group on any of the assessments we examined. And it doesn't hold good enough workforce equality data to inform its impact assessments. This means it can't effectively understand how potential changes may affect its workforce.

As with positive action, we found that some staff don't understand or support the service's intent to promote equality and inclusion. The service should continue to make improvements to its processes in this area and make sure staff at all levels of the organisation understand the contents of its EDI strategy.

Managing performance and developing leaders



Requires improvement (2019: Requires improvement)

Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at managing performance and developing leaders.

Fire and rescue services should have robust and meaningful performance management arrangements in place for their staff. All staff should be supported to meet their potential, and there should be a focus on developing staff and improving diversity into leadership roles.

Areas for improvement

- The service should improve all staff understanding and application of the performance development review process, ensuring it uses this to develop talent within the organisation.
- The service should put in place an open and fair process to identify, develop and support high-potential staff and aspiring leaders.

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

The service doesn't consistently manage individual performance

The service has an inconsistent process in place for performance and development. Staff don't all have specific and individual objectives or have had their performance assessed in the past year. In the year to 31 March 2021, 71 percent of wholetime staff, 81 percent of support staff and 61 percent of [on-call](#) staff received an appraisal. And 33 percent (66 of 200) of staff have a performance conversation once a year or less.

Many staff we spoke to don't view the appraisal process as meaningful or effective. Managers told us they don't feel it effectively links to organisational objectives. Once completed, appraisals are stored locally and not submitted for review. This results in an inconsistent approach, meaning development needs are identified but not always actioned.

We are aware that the service is introducing a new personal development review system in April 2022. It should make sure it uses this as an opportunity to formalise its appraisal process, introduce central quality assurance and tangibly develop talent within the organisation.

The service has improved its promotion processes

We are encouraged to find that since our last inspection, the service has put considerable effort into developing its promotion and progression processes so they are fair and understood by staff. The promotion and progression policies are comprehensive and cover opportunities in all roles.

The service's workforce plan includes a detailed annual promotion timetable. We found most staff understand this timetable and can use it to plan and prepare for future opportunities. This has improved staff perceptions of fairness and consistency in the process. The service uses temporary promotions appropriately to fill short-term resourcing gaps. At 31 March 2021, the average length of a temporary promotion was 192 days. This is reflective of the structured annual promotion process.

We found that the templates and tools the service uses to manage and record promotion processes at different levels are inconsistent. The service may wish to consider standardising them.

The service has effective succession planning processes in place, which allow it to effectively manage the career pathways of its staff, including roles needing specialist skills. This is considered by the establishment group, which determines future promotional requirements. The service has introduced a separate talent conversation process to help those seeking promotion. But we found that not all managers are using it effectively.

The service could still do more to identify and develop high-potential leaders

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

It has some talent management schemes in place to develop leaders and high-potential staff. This includes a talent pool process, where staff receive some additional development opportunities. It isn't clear how the service uses this, other than to fill projected vacancies at station manager level in the short term.

The service should consider putting in place more formal arrangements to identify and support members of staff to become senior leaders in the longer term. The service has detailed information in its workforce plan on the expected vacancies at each level of the organisation up to 2025. But it isn't using this information to drive succession planning and identification of future high-potential talent at all levels.

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