HMICFRS

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

Fire & Rescue Service 2023–25

Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service

Contents

Changes to this round of inspection 1

Overall summary 2

Service in numbers 4

Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies 6

Main findings 6

Preventing fires and other risks 9

Main findings 9

Protecting the public through fire regulation 12

Area for improvement 12

Main findings 12

Responding to fires and other emergencies 16

Main findings 16

Responding to major and multi-agency incidents 20

Main findings 20

Making best use of resources 24

Promising practice 24

Main findings 25

Making the fire and rescue service affordable now and in the future 30

Main findings 30

Promoting the right values and culture 33

Areas for improvement 33

Main findings 33

Getting the right people with the right skills 36

Area for improvement 36
Main findings 36

Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity 39

Area for improvement 39
Main findings 39

Managing performance and developing leaders 42

Innovative practice 42
Main findings 43

Changes to this round of inspection

We last inspected Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service in May 2021. And in December 2021, we published our inspection report with our findings on the service's effectiveness and efficiency and how well it looks after its people.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Overall summary

Our judgments

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

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

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

HMI summary

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

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

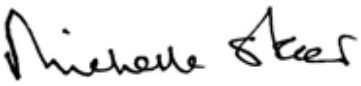
We were pleased to see that the service has made progress since our last inspection in May 2021. For example, the service has improved how it commands fire service assets assertively and safely at incidents, how it promotes equality, diversity and inclusion and how it works with underrepresented groups in the workforce.

We have judged the service to be outstanding in three areas and good in five others.

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

- The service is outstanding at preventing fires and other risks. It carries out a high number of home fire safety checks and safe and well visits (SAWVs) and gives priority to those most at risk in the community.
- The service is outstanding at responding to major and multi-agency incidents. It is well prepared to respond to these types of emergency incidents, and it works well with partners to make sure that there is an effective response.
- The service is outstanding at making best use of its resources. It has comprehensive financial and resourcing plans aligned with its strategic priorities and sustainability strategies that are achieving value for money for the public.
- The service should use its enforcement powers in a more proportionate way.
- The service needs to do more to make sure its values and behaviours are demonstrated at all levels of the organisation and diversify its future and current leaders.

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.



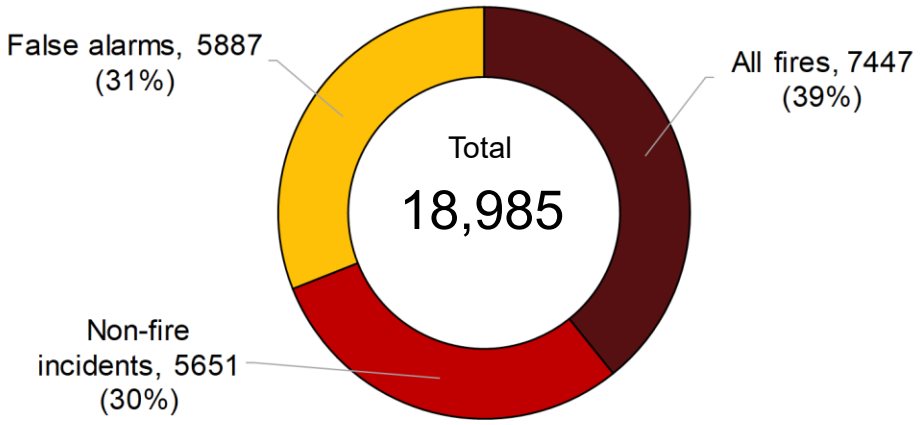
Michelle Skeer

HM Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Service in numbers

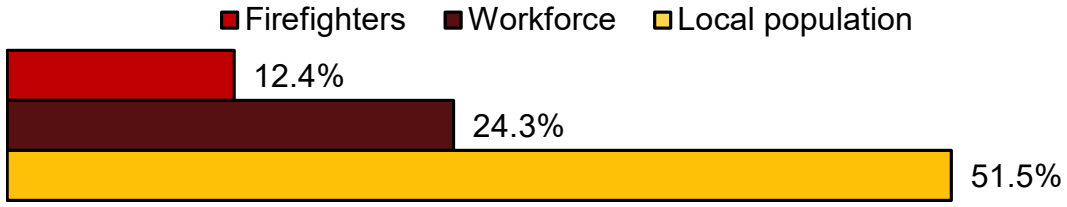
Profile	Merseyside	England
Area Square miles	252	50,370
Population (thousands) 30 June 2021	1,423	56,536
Population density Thousands per square mile	5.6	1.1
Cost		
Funding Year ending 31 March 2022	£63.8m	£2.5bn
Expenditure per population Year ending 31 March 2022	£52.99	£41.88
Response		
Incidents attended per 1,000 population Year ending 30 September 2022	13.3	11.0
Home fire safety checks carried out by fire and rescue service per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2022	28.1	7.7
Fire safety audits per 100 known premises Year ending 31 March 2022	0.8	2.0
Availability of wholetime pumps Year ending 31 March 2022	99.7%	
Availability of on-call pumps Year ending 31 March 2022	99.7%	

Incidents attended in the year to 30 September 2022

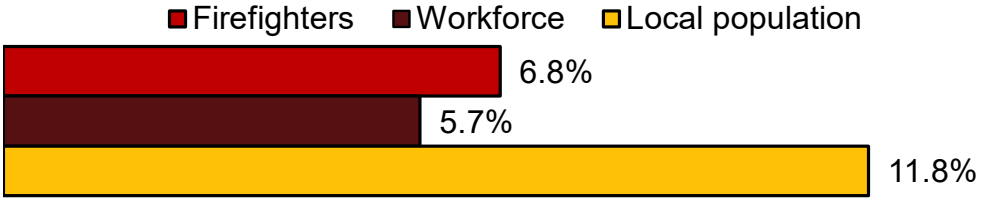


Workforce	Merseyside	England
Five-year change in total workforce 2017 to 2022	-1.9%	0.2%
Number of firefighters per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2022	0.66	0.62
Percentage of firefighters who are wholetime Year ending 31 March 2022	66.3%	65.2%

Percentage of firefighters, workforce and population who are female as at 31 March 2022



Percentage of firefighters, workforce and population who are from ethnic minority backgrounds as at 31 March 2022



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

Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies

Good

Merseyside 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. It should use its protection and response capabilities to prevent or mitigate these risks for the public.

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

Main findings

The service identifies and understands risk in the community

The service has assessed a suitable range of risks and threats using a thorough community risk management planning process. In its assessment of risk, it uses information it has collected from a broad range of internal and external sources and datasets.

When appropriate, the service has consulted and held constructive dialogue with its communities and other relevant parties to understand risk and explain how it intends to mitigate it. For example, it has spoken with and listened to the opinions of community members about its service plans. It also works with key partners, such as Merseyside Police, Liverpool City Council and staff representative bodies, to understand what is expected of the service.

The service used an external provider to consult with the community about its integrated risk management plan (IRMP) prior to it being introduced. A total of 125 people were consulted – 25 from each of Merseyside's 5 districts – to represent all parts of the community. This is limited in terms of reflecting the local population, which is around 1.4 million. There is no evidence of any ongoing consultation taking place while the IRMP is active.

The service could improve how it consults with its local community, including using inclusive social research practices, to develop its understanding of risk in the community.

The service has a detailed and effective risk management plan

The service uses an IRMP to assess risk at a local community level and record the findings. This plan describes how the service intends to use its prevention, protection and response activities to mitigate or reduce the risks and threats the community faces now and in the future.

Information about previous incidents is analysed, and firefighters and equipment are aligned with demand and risk to make sure that the service's emergency response is effective.

The service has effective arrangements to gather information and make it available through modern systems

The service collects information about the highest-risk people, places and threats it has identified. For example, through data sharing with the NHS and other partner agencies, the service identifies vulnerability, which helps it plan how to provide its services. However, some of the information we reviewed was limited or out of date. For example, information on an industrial high-risk COMAH site hadn't been updated since August 2019. The service's policy states that it should be updated annually.

The service could improve its assurance processes to confirm that risk information is up to date and the most contemporary and accurate information is available to those who manage and respond to emergencies.

We sampled a broad range of the risk information the service collects, including on high-risk industrial sites, tall residential buildings and a hospital.

This information is readily available for the service's prevention, protection and response staff. This means these teams can identify, reduce and mitigate risk effectively. Where appropriate, the service shares risk information with other organisations, such as local authorities, health professionals and private-sector landlords.

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

The service has used operational activity to inform changes in its emergency response capabilities

The service has recorded and communicated risk information effectively. It also routinely updates risk assessments and uses feedback from local and national operational activities to inform its planning assumptions. For example, based on information from risk assessments, the service has introduced specialist stations in certain locations. This includes two fire stations with a dedicated wildfire capability to meet the demand in the local and wider service area.

Preventing fires and other risks

Outstanding

Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service is outstanding at preventing fires and other risks.

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

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 prevention strategy prioritises those most at risk from fire and other emergencies

The service's prevention strategy is clearly linked to the risks it has identified in its IRMP. It recognises the factors that contribute to vulnerability and defines how the service and its partners will work to reduce risk through a range of initiatives.

The service's teams work well together and with other relevant organisations on prevention, and they share relevant information when needed. The service uses information to adjust its planning assumptions and direct activity between its prevention, protection and response functions. For example, following a fatal fire in January 2022, the service introduced a targeted prevention campaign to provide information about the hazards and risks associated with charging electric bikes and scooters. Firefighters worked with prevention advocates to support the community.

The service directs its prevention work at vulnerable people

The service uses a risk-based approach to clearly prioritise its prevention activity towards people most at risk from fire and other emergencies. For example, firefighters are provided with NHS Open Exeter information to help them identify where vulnerable people live in the community. They use this to prioritise visits as part of their prevention work.

The service uses a broad range of information and data to target its prevention activity at vulnerable individuals and groups. It has analysed data gathered from incidents, which is supplemented by information from partner organisations, such as the NHS, and data such as the Government's indices of deprivation.

It carries out a range of interventions, which it adapts to the level of risk in its communities. Firefighters carry out home fire safety checks, and prevention advocates carry out SAWVs. Following fire incidents, the service initiates prevention campaigns that are tiered according to the severity of the incidents.

Watch-based teams and prevention advocates have targets for completing home fire safety checks and SAWVs respectively, but we found that they could be better directed towards specific risks.

In 2021/22, the service carried out 28.1 home fire safety checks per 1,000 of the population, which is well above the rate for England of 7.8 visits per 1,000 of the population. On 31 March 2022, the service had 561 outstanding prevention visits to be allocated to staff, and it has effective arrangements in place to manage this backlog.

Staff have received appropriate training to make home fire safety checks and SAWVs

Staff told us they have the right skills and confidence to make home fire safety checks and SAWVs. These checks and visits cover an appropriate range of hazards that can put vulnerable people at greater risk from fire and other emergencies, including those who have home medical devices and people with disabilities.

Safeguarding concerns are recognised and action is taken to reduce risk

Staff we interviewed told us about occasions when they had identified safeguarding problems. They told us they feel confident and trained to act appropriately and promptly. They explained the service's process for reporting concerns and making referrals to partner organisations. There is a good understanding of safeguarding indicators, and examples were provided where staff have acted as a result of visiting people in their homes.

The service works with partners to promote prevention

The service works with a wide range of other organisations to prevent fires and other emergencies. These include local authorities such as adult and children's safeguarding boards, health professionals and housing providers. The service helps people from these organisations to recognise the hazards and risks of fire and other emergencies and make appropriate referrals.

There is no evidence that the service has arrangements in place for partner agencies or organisations to provide prevention services themselves.

Firefighters routinely refer people at greatest risk to their vulnerable persons advocate colleagues to better meet their needs. And the service acts appropriately on the referrals it receives.

The service routinely exchanges information with other public sector organisations about people and groups at greatest risk. It uses this information to challenge planning assumptions and target prevention activity. For example, using data and information gathered from incidents and from working with other fire and rescue services, the service has identified lithium-ion batteries as a specific fire risk. It has written formally to a range of organisations to inform them of the prevention work that it is doing in response to this risk. The service promotes the sharing of advice and information through its social media accounts.

There are dedicated resources to tackle fire-setting behaviour

The service has a range of suitable and effective interventions to target and educate people with different needs who show signs of fire-setting behaviour. These include school visits and street intervention teams who work with local authorities in high-risk locations.

When appropriate, it routinely shares information with relevant organisations to support the prosecution of arsonists or to direct them towards restorative justice practices. Each district in the service has an arson advocate who shares intelligence with a range of partners including Merseyside Police and Liverpool City Council. The arson advocate is supported by a group manager who investigates arson and deliberate fire incidents.

Prevention activity is evaluated to assure good practice

The service has good evaluation tools in place to measure how effective its activity is and to make sure all sections of its communities get appropriate access to the prevention services that meet their needs. For example, the service employs an external provider to contact members of the public who have had a prevention-related visit to gather information about the quality of the service provided.

Prevention activities take account of feedback from the public, other organisations and other parts of the service. For example, staff told us that they regularly meet partners to discuss community risks. They meet many different groups such as utility companies, councils and arson teams from partner agencies.

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

Protecting the public through fire regulation

Good

Merseyside 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 assure itself that its use of enforcement powers prioritises the highest risks and includes proportionate activity to reduce risk.

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 IRMP supports effective protection work

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

Staff across the service are involved in this activity, effectively exchanging information as needed. For example, firefighters complete simple operational fire safety assessments as a part of the service's protection work. The service then uses information to adjust planning assumptions and direct activity between its protection, prevention and response functions. This means resources are aligned with risk. Where hazards and risks are identified, they are shared with the appropriate function. For example, when a risk to the safety of firefighters responding to emergency incidents is identified, a form is submitted to make sure that the information is shared with the response team.

The service directs protection work to reflect the highest risk

The service's risk-based inspection programme is focused on the service's highest-risk buildings. The service has prioritised premises where people sleep, such as hospitals and hotels, and high-risk buildings that its protection staff haven't previously visited. This follows a revision of the categorisation of high-risk buildings using the service's premises risk model.

The audits we reviewed had been completed in the time frame the service has set itself. All the inspection activity was completed within the appropriate time frame as per the service's protection policy and procedure.

Protection work is quality assured

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

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

Not all the audits we reviewed were completed in a consistent and systematic way or in line with the service's policies. We found evidence in all records that the authorising manager had given signed approval, but the Health and Safety Executive's enforcement management model wasn't completed as a part of the fire safety audit. The model is a system that helps inspectors make enforcement decisions in line with the Health and Safety Executive's enforcement policy statement.

The service has appropriate governance arrangements in place for protection

The service carries out proportionate quality assurance of its protection activity. Staff told us that each fire safety inspector receives a quality assurance check every six months. This is linked to the National Fire Chiefs Council's framework. The training manager monitors any themes that arise and discusses them at monthly protection management meetings. Feedback and findings are then recorded in the protection management system.

The service has good evaluation tools in place to measure how effective its activity is and to make sure all sections of its communities get appropriate access to the protection services that meet their needs. The performance management group meets regularly, and its remit includes the monitoring and reporting of protection work. Performance indicators are in place to measure the effectiveness of the risk-based inspection programme.

The service could improve parts of its enforcement activity

The service doesn't use its full range of enforcement powers consistently. We found it doesn't always take appropriate opportunities to prosecute those who don't comply with fire safety regulations. The service doesn't have an automated process to consider prosecution at the point of a prohibition notice being served. The service's fire safety inspectors told us that it is at their discretion to make a referral for prosecution and that they sometimes lose confidence in the process. The service has also recognised that staff's knowledge and understanding of prosecution could be improved, and it has planned several continuing professional development courses to support this area of learning.

In the year ending 31 March 2022, the service issued 5 alteration notices, 386 informal notifications, 64 enforcement notices, 28 prohibition notices and completed 1 prosecution. It completed six prosecutions in the five years from 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2022.

The protection function is well resourced

The service has enough qualified protection staff to meet the requirements of its risk-based inspection programme. The protection function has 70 posts. These include:

- administration roles;
- inspectors; and
- members of uniformed staff, including supervisory, middle and senior managers.

This is supplemented by station-based firefighters who hold formal qualifications and participate in protection work. This helps it 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.

The service has responded positively to new fire safety legislation

Since our last inspection, the Government has introduced the Building Safety Act 2022 and the Fire Safety Regulations 2022 to bring about better regulation and management of tall buildings.

The service is supporting the introduction of the Building Safety Regulator. The service has assigned three staff, consisting of one fire engineer and two fire safety inspectors, to provide training and work with people who have responsibility for the fire safety of tall buildings. It expects these arrangements to be manageable and not affect how other protection activity is completed.

The Fire Safety Regulations 2022 introduced a range of duties for the managers of tall buildings. These include a requirement to give the fire and rescue service floor

plans and inform them of any substantial faults to essential firefighting equipment, such as firefighting lifts.

We found that the service had good arrangements in place to receive this information. When it doesn't receive the right information, it acts. And it updates the risk information it gives its operational staff accordingly.

The service could improve how it shares information with other agencies

The service works with other enforcement agencies to regulate fire safety, but it does so inconsistently. It doesn't routinely exchange risk information with them. Our inspectors reviewed several fire safety records, and there was no evidence to show that information had been shared with relevant partners to inform them of formal notices being applied.

The service manages building consultations effectively

The service responds to all building consultations on time. This means it consistently meets its statutory responsibility to comment on fire safety arrangements at new and altered buildings. In 2021/22, the service responded to 99.1 percent of building consultations within the required time frame.

The service works effectively with businesses to promote fire safety

The service proactively works with local businesses and other organisations to promote compliance with fire safety legislation. Staff told us that, following an invite from the chamber of commerce, the service liaised with approximately 160 people who are responsible for businesses in the community. This provided an opportunity to promote business fire safety and share applicable information to improve awareness.

The service has a proactive approach to reduce the number of unwanted fire signals

An effective risk-based approach is in place to manage the number of unwanted fire signals. The service has introduced a range of initiatives to manage and reduce unwanted fire signals. These include what is known as call challenging within the emergency control room, where staff assess calls and decide whether or not they require a fire and rescue response. The number of unwanted fire signals is managed through the performance management group, and information is shared with fire station managers to inform them of frequent and repeated occurrences. The station manager co-ordinates work to reduce the unwanted fire signals. Since 2018/19, the proportion of incidents relating to unwanted fire signals that haven't been attended by the service is 62 percent, which is consistently higher than the England rate of 36 percent.

Fewer unwanted calls mean 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

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

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

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

Main findings

Response and availability are aligned with risk and demand

The service's response strategy is linked to the risks it has identified in its IRMP. Its fire engines and response staff, as well as its working patterns, are designed and located to help the service respond flexibly to fires and other emergencies with the appropriate resources. For example, the service has identified ten key fire station locations where it makes sure there is always a fire engine available. This means that the service can get to most incidents in the service area within ten minutes.

Duty systems have been adapted to align with demand, which means that the right people and equipment are in the right place at the right time.

The service has a definitive response standard

There are no national response standards of performance for the public. But the service has set out its own response standards in its IRMP. As a minimum standard, it aims for the first fire engine to attend all incidents where there is a risk of death or serious injury within 10 minutes, 90 percent of the time.

The service told us that in 2021/22, it achieved its response standards on 95.4 percent of occasions. The service consistently meets its standards. Home Office data shows that in the year ending 31 June 2022, the service's response time to primary fires was 7 minutes and 48 seconds. This is in line with the average for predominantly urban services.

The service intends to improve its response time. It has identified a software application that will speed up the time it takes to respond to emergency incidents through the enhanced mobilisation of firefighters.

The service maintains a high level of availability of fire engines

To support its response strategy, the service aims to have 90 percent of fire engines available at all times. The service consistently meets this standard. In 2021/22, it achieved an overall annual availability of 99.7 percent.

The service has effective command arrangements

The service has trained incident commanders who are assessed regularly and properly. We found clear evidence of training and development for all incident commanders. This includes formal training and assessment, coaching, mentoring and command seminars to support continuing professional development. This helps the service safely, assertively and effectively manage the range of incidents it could face, from small and routine ones to complex multi-agency incidents.

As part of our inspection, we interviewed incident commanders from across the service. They were familiar with risk assessing, decision-making and recording information at incidents in line with national best practice as well as the Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles (JESIP).

When we inspected the service in 2021, we identified an area for improvement as the service couldn't assure itself that it had procedures in place to make sure that operational decisions made at incidents were recorded and that these procedures were understood by staff. As a result, the service has introduced several methods of recording important operational decisions that are made at incidents. These include providing senior officers with grab bags that contain hard-copy logbooks to record information. Logbooks are also located on fire engines and at incident command units, so they are always accessible to staff. Staff can also record information using body-worn video and dictaphones. Additionally, there is now an electronic decision log in the emergency control room. There is a policy and a procedure to explain the process of decision logging, and staff have a good awareness of the process. Therefore, this area for improvement has now been discharged.

Changes in control are improving effectiveness

We were pleased to see the service's control staff integrated into its command, training, exercise, debrief and assurance activity. The control function has been aligned with the response directorate and, as a result, the team has become more involved with service delivery. For example, members of the control team now routinely attend operational assurance team meetings and contribute to incident reviews. Staff told us that training is in place to assure knowledge and understanding of all incidents.

Some risk information isn't up to date

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

The information we reviewed was mostly up to date and detailed. However, there was some evidence of records that weren't up to date. Our inspectors viewed several records that hadn't been reviewed in accordance with the service's policy. These included records on a high-risk site. This could compromise firefighter safety in the event of an emergency incident due to important information not being accurate or available.

Staff can easily access and understand records. Encouragingly, information had often been completed with input from the service's prevention, protection and response functions when appropriate.

Operational performance is assured and aligned with national operational guidance

As part of the inspection, we reviewed a range of emergency incidents and training events. These included fires in tall buildings, fires in homes, road traffic collisions and water-related incidents where people had been rescued.

We were pleased to see that the service routinely follows its policies to make sure that staff command incidents are in line with operational guidance. It updates internal risk information with the information it receives. The service holds regular meetings to review emergency incident response, operational procedures and incident command. The meetings have a structured approach that considers the procedures applied to resolve an incident and how they align with national operational guidance. The meetings' findings are recorded. Good practice is recognised and opportunities for learning and areas for improvement are identified. And the service exchanges this information with appropriate organisations, such as neighbouring fire and rescue services and the national operational learning portal.

We were encouraged to see that the service is contributing towards and acting on learning from other fire and rescue services or operational learning gathered from emergency service partners. The service has an operational improvement group that considers national operational learning or joint organisational learning action or information notes. Following an initial assessment, changes are made by departmental managers where applicable.

The service communicates with the public through a range of methods

The service has good systems in place to inform members of the public about ongoing incidents and help keep them safe during and after incidents. This includes using social media platforms to warn and inform people of incidents and offer advice on how they can protect themselves. The service works in partnership with the local resilience forum (LRF) to share information through structured communications teams.

Responding to major and multi-agency incidents

Outstanding

Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service is outstanding 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).

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

Main findings

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

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 community risk management planning. For example, the service uses the national risk register and works with partners in the LRF to manage the community risk register. The service has identified six incident types that, although less likely to occur than other incidents, would have a significant effect on the community and the service.

It is also familiar with the significant risks neighbouring fire and rescue services may face and which it might reasonably be asked to respond to in an emergency. These include marauding terrorist attacks and wildfire incidents. Firefighters have access to risk information from neighbouring services. The service uses the Resilience Direct system for sharing and collating risk information, including content applicable to neighbouring services.

The service is developing its capability to respond to major and multi-agency incidents

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

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

We found that the service had well-developed policies and procedures in place for safely managing this type of incident. Staff at all levels understand them, and robust training and exercising have taken place to test them. The service has been allowed access to a tall building that provides living accommodation. It has used the venue for training on how to respond to a fire in this type of building. The training and exercising activities have included firefighters, incident commanders, control staff and members of neighbouring fire and rescue services.

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

Our inspectors observed the system that is in place to manage the transfer of information between the emergency control room and the scene of an incident when a tall building is involved in a fire. Specifically, inspectors were shown the electronic system that can be used to relay important information, such as the people who are at the greatest risk and need to be rescued. Staff told us that information on the system can be accessed from both the emergency control room and the incident command unit, and information can be related from one location to the other.

In August 2023, the service confirmed that it has fully implemented the system and is able to provide information from the emergency control room to a bridgehead as well as the incident command unit. This system is imperative to ensure the most effective response to this type of incident.

Not all staff at all levels properly understand the policies and procedures the service has in place. We found a good level of understanding among middle managers who operate as incident commanders at emergency incidents and some supervisory managers, but some firefighters have limited knowledge.

The service works effectively with other fire and rescue services

The service supports other fire and rescue services responding to emergency incidents. For example, the service has responded to major incidents such as wildfires in neighbouring fire and rescue service areas. It is the lead authority for national resilience and as such, has a comprehensive understanding of the arrangements needed to co-ordinate and manage a regional or national response. It works in collaboration with neighbouring services and can form part of a multi-agency response.

The service has successfully deployed to other services and has used national resilience assets, such as high-volume pumps.

The service is improving at exercising with neighbouring fire and rescue services

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

In 2021/22, the service carried out five exercises with neighbouring services aligned with applicable risks. This is an improvement on none in 2020/21 and two in 2019/20. Neighbouring fire and rescue services have attended several exercises at Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service to share information about policy and procedure when dealing with fires in tall buildings. These were practical exercises carried out in this type of building.

We were encouraged to see that the service uses feedback from these exercises to inform risk information and service plans.

There is a good understanding of JESIP among staff

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

We found strong evidence that the service follows JESIP principles. This included a consistent level of awareness, knowledge and understanding of JESIP and how it is applied by staff who respond to emergency incidents. Our inspectors spoke to firefighters and supervisory and middle managers who were all able to explain how they use JESIP to work with other emergency responders, and they explained the benefits that this brings to their roles.

We sampled a range of debriefs the service had carried out after multi-agency incidents and exercises. We were encouraged to find that the service was identifying problems it had with applying JESIP and taking appropriate, prompt action with other emergency organisations.

The service works effectively with partners

The service has good arrangements in place to respond to emergencies with partners that make up the Merseyside LRF. These arrangements include supporting the LRF by being an active member of meeting groups and providing the chairperson for some of those meetings. The service also has a joint command and control centre located in its headquarters.

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. In 2021/22, it participated in 60 multi-agency training exercises, which is an improvement on 3 in 2020/21. It has participated in national exercising activity, including in the aftermath of the power distribution disruption caused by Storm Arwen.

There is a clear process to acknowledge and consider national learning

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

The operational improvement group is responsible for analysing national operational learning action and information notes, which it implements where applicable. When changes are required in areas such as local guidance, training packages, service instructions or e-learning, they are made by departmental managers.

Making best use of resources

Outstanding

Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service is outstanding at making best use of its resources.

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

The service told us that its revenue budget for 2023/24 is £67.9m. And the service also told us that this is a 9.9 percent increase on the previous financial year.

Promising practice

The service makes excellent use of the people and resources available

The service has four different duty systems (work patterns) for firefighters, which are aligned with emergency response demand (in 2022, 65.5 percent of all incidents occurred during the day) and contribute to improving productivity and efficiency.

These systems are wholetime, low-level activity and risk, day crewing wholetime retained and hybrid.

This range of options allows the service to be flexible if there is a high number of incidents or where there is a large-scale incident. This assures that its response standards are consistently achieved. The service's target is to have the first fire engine in attendance at life-risk incidents in 10 minutes on 90 percent of occasions. The service reports that this was achieved on 95.4 percent of occasions in 2021/22.

The duty systems and performance management arrangements support high levels of workforce productivity. This means that when firefighters aren't responding to emergency incidents, their time is used efficiently, which helps the service achieve the objectives in its integrated risk management plan. For example, this includes carrying out prevention-related home visits, gathering risk information, fire safety inspections and other core work, such as competency-based training. Staff carry out these activities at the most appropriate times of the day.

The service makes good use of key performance indicators and uses data to evaluate and monitor the success of its objectives. Data is scrutinised at middle and senior management level through formal meeting groups, such as the operational board meeting and the performance management group.

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

Main findings

Objectives are supported and achieved by effective financial plans

The service's financial and workforce plans, including allocating resources to prevention, protection and response, continue to be consistent with the risks and priorities it has identified in its IRMP. All the service's functions have enough people, equipment and budget provision to make sure that it achieves the aims and objectives set out in its IRMP.

Since our last inspection, the service has increased its number of fire engines from 30 to 32. This increase was based on a reassessment of the resources needed to respond to high-impact incidents. These occur less often than other types of incidents but require more firefighters and equipment to resolve. The service has added 20 supervisory manager roles to support the response function. And it has increased the number of people who work in the emergency control room from 32 to 35. This has improved resilience and provides more opportunities for other core work, such as training, to be carried out.

The service has identified lithium-ion batteries as a new and emerging risk to people and property due to fire-related incidents. There is a dedicated innovation fund in the 2023/24 budget to support work dealing with this risk.

Work continues on a new £39m training and development academy, which is due to open in 2024. It will provide a modern training environment and replace the existing facility.

The service has evaluated its mix of crewing and duty systems. It has analysed its response cover and can show that it deploys its fire engines and response staff to

manage risk efficiently. It has reviewed incidents that have occurred in the past to help it plan for future emergency incidents and make sure that the response is effective. As a result, it has identified ten key fire stations that will always have a fire engine available to respond. This measure makes sure that response standards are achieved, and it is supplemented by the ability to staff additional fire engines during periods of high demand or increased risk.

The service has an operational assurance team that monitors the response to emergency incidents. Key performance indicators (KPIs), based on relevant and reliable data sources, are reported to demonstrate that the duty systems in place are efficient. The KPI for average response time is reported in the 2023/24 service delivery plan, which shows that the average response time is improving. The use of KPIs within this function provides a quantifiable measure of performance over time for specific objectives.

The service builds its plans on sound scenarios. They help make sure the service is sustainable and have financial controls that reduce the risk of misusing public money. Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority oversees and scrutinises the service's budget performance to make sure it uses public money appropriately. A budget strategy day is held with fire authority members each year to support financial planning.

The service's work patterns and performance management arrangements make sure its workforce is productive

We were pleased to see that the service's arrangements for managing performance clearly link resource use to its IRMP and its strategic priorities. The service has clear priorities and objectives stated in its IRMP, and it has resourced each of its functions to achieve these objectives as well as its KPIs and local performance indicators.

The service has set ambitious prevention targets and aims to complete 50,000 home fire safety checks and 10,000 SAWVs each year. Since the service is on track to achieve these targets this year, they have been increased to 55,000 and 11,000 respectively. In 2023/24, it has targets for firefighters to carry out 2,112 fire safety audits and 44 training exercises away from their fire stations.

There are effective arrangements, in terms of governance, to make sure that the service meets its targets, objectives and indicators. If it doesn't meet these aims, it has processes to examine why they aren't being achieved. The service has four different levels of performance monitoring:

1. KPIs – these are reported to the fire authority.
2. KPIs with outcome indicators – these track progress against a target, such as a reduction in a specific incident type, and are reported to the fire authority.
3. Tier one local performance indicators – outputs and indicators are reported to the performance management group.

4. Tier two lower-level indicators – these are reported to function and station management teams.

The service understands how it uses its wholetime firefighters. It collects data on how they spend their time across day and night shifts. It makes the most of its capacity. For example, each fire station has a station plan that is created by local staff and managers and reflects the service's aims. Within each plan, there is a range of output targets including home fire safety checks, risk information gathering and training exercises. These targets are monitored and reported by the performance management group and supported by a service-wide performance intelligence system. The system provides up-to-date information about progress against targets and helps prioritise the workload of the watch-based teams. We found examples of watch managers using the system to plan work and station managers using it to monitor performance, provide accountability and support flexible working.

Not all fire stations have firefighters working during the night. Of the 23 stations in the service, 13 are crewed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This is an outcome of analysing the demand for each fire station location. The service ensures resilience in terms of emergency response by offering wholetime firefighters a dual contract that requires them to respond within 30 minutes in times of high demand or large-scale incidents. This also means that most people will be working during the daytime, when they will be most productive.

Firefighters told us that there is a clear focus on the targets to be achieved and that their work periods are filled with achieving the different areas of service delivery. For example, the service has decided that watch-based teams need to complete an average of 8.5 home fire safety checks during each shift period. This target reflects the time taken to complete one visit. Staff told us that they plan their working time to achieve this target, recognising that the most effective period to speak to people in their homes is normally during the daytime.

The service is proactive in collaborating with partner organisations

We were pleased to see that the service meets its statutory duty to collaborate. It routinely considers opportunities to collaborate with other emergency responders. There are multiple locations across the service area where it is co-located with Merseyside Police and the North West Ambulance Service. The service's headquarters also accommodate staff from Merseyside Police and include a joint command and control centre. As new buildings are developed, collaboration with partner organisations is considered.

Collaborative work is aligned with the priorities in the service's IRMP. For example, the service has data-sharing agreements with some of its partners to support its prevention work. These help to identify people in the community who are at increased risk due to vulnerability. It is also working to develop data-sharing agreements with ambulance and police partners This will help to improve how the service identifies

people who are vulnerable and at increased risk from fire and other emergencies and help to provide support at the earliest opportunity. Additionally, the service is working with Merseyside Police to develop a process for fire investigation accreditation.

The service comprehensively monitors, reviews and evaluates the benefits and results of its collaborations. It produces a local collaboration overview document that explains the collaboration activity and projects that the service has in place. The document reports benefits in financial savings and other areas, such as improving effectiveness of response. Notable results include the joint command and control centre, which the service reports has provided savings of £345,000 since its inception in 2014.

The service has structured continuity arrangements

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

The service has appropriate business continuity plans in place for industrial action. It is confident and can show that it has enough resources available for future periods of industrial action. It has arrangements in place to maintain response through formal contracted agreements with staff who are trained to respond to emergencies as a part of their existing roles, which are aligned with their skills and competencies. During periods of industrial action, the service can continue to respond to fires and other emergencies, as well as regional and national requests, by staffing its own fire engines and the national resilience assets located in the service. We also found evidence of continuity testing across the service. For example, in the emergency control room, testing has been completed across the different teams, and learning and good practice are identified through a debrief process.

The service shows sound financial management

There are regular reviews to consider all the service's expenditure, including its non-pay costs. And this scrutiny makes sure the service gets value for money. For example, the finance team works closely with budget holders to review and challenge expenditure. Monthly meetings are held to review revenue and capital expenditure. Budget managers are required to provide a statement on how they will manage any overspend. Also, there are governance and assurance processes in place, both internal and external, which support the financial management of the budget.

The service has made savings and efficiencies that haven't affected its operational performance and the service it gives the public. Although there have been increases in resources in recent years, over the last 10 years the service has operated with fewer fire engines (before 2013, it had 42 fire engines, but in 2021/22, it had 32) and firefighters and still maintained an effective emergency response. It has set a balanced budget in 2023/24, although further work is required to balance the budget in subsequent years.

The service is taking steps to make sure it achieves efficiency gains through sound financial management and best working practices. It is doing this in important areas such as estates, fleet and procurement. For example, there have been issues with the management of the contract for the provision of energy, which is managed through Liverpool City Council. We were told by staff that the case was reviewed and due diligence completed to provide assurance that appropriate contract management arrangements are in place. We have been provided with evidence to demonstrate that the service's procurement of electricity and gas is subject to appropriate governance.

The service has built new housing to accommodate firefighters who respond to emergency incidents outside core duty hours. The decision to build rather than refurbish existing properties was taken to reflect value for money. It also provides better options for resale on the open market and improves cost recovery, so the service is more likely to achieve a better financial return.

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

Good

Merseyside 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.

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

Main findings

The service has a good understanding of its future financial challenges

The service has a sound understanding of future financial challenges. It plans to mitigate its main or significant financial risks. For example, it has an inflation reserve to cover unforeseen pay and price inflation.

The underpinning assumptions are relatively robust, realistic and prudent. They take account of the wider external environment and some scenario planning for future spending reductions. These include assumptions on pay, inflation, pensions and future funding.

We were pleased to see that the service has identified savings and investment opportunities to improve the service to the public or generate further savings. There is a balanced budget for 2023/24, which includes savings of £380,000. The service has identified that it needs to make over £1m of savings between 2024/25 and 2027/28 to avoid a budget deficit.

The service has plans for the use of reserves

The service has a sensible and sustainable plan for using its reserves. This plan includes £3m in general reserves to provide security in the event of unforeseeable financial pressure. It also has several earmarked reserves for specific purposes to meet known or predicted future liabilities. For example, it has a training reserve if the allocated budget is insufficient, an insurance reserve to pay insurance excesses and a pensions reserve to cover any future potential legal or administrative costs.

The fleet and estate strategies are aligned with the IRMP

The service's fleet and estate strategies have clear links to its IRMP. For example, fires at recycling and waste processing plants are one of six risks identified in its IRMP. To support the effective resolution of incidents at these types of premises, the service is procuring a specialist fire engine that is a combined vehicle offering the functionality of both a fire engine and an aerial ladder platform. The service believes this will help firefighting, reduce the effect of these fires on the community and improve the safety of the people who respond to the incident.

Both strategies exploit opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness. The service's £55m five-year capital programme supports infrastructure improvements. The cost of the new training and development academy has increased due to inflation, but this has been subject to a cost-benefit analysis to check that the plan is still affordable.

A new fire station will also be built at the same site as the new academy. It will replace two fire stations, and firefighters will work a hybrid duty system at this location. The new fire station will provide a purpose-built, modern working environment and form part of the service's estate improvements programme. The wider programme includes energy-saving initiatives and making sure workplaces meet the needs of the workforce.

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

New systems and technology are transforming the way the service works

We were encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since our last inspection. The service actively considers how changes in technology and future innovation may affect risk.

It also seeks to exploit opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness presented by changes in technology. The service has invested in systems to improve its efficiency, such as the risk information database. The introduction of this database has helped the service to make sure that data and information held are accurate, up to date and managed efficiently. The system supports prevention and protection work

and helps these functions to share information. This means that work is more easily prioritised and staff time is better used, which improves workforce productivity.

Additionally, there is a new system to support the assessment and recording of risk. It supports a consistent approach to information gathering, more effective planning of review visits and better time management of staff. And the service is introducing an enhanced mobilisation system to improve response time. It has put in place the capacity and capability it needs 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, it is currently analysing data to understand how it can support the North West Ambulance Service during periods of high demand. The service is committed to providing emergency medical response. For new firefighters joining the organisation, there is a contractual requirement to provide medical response as a part of their role.

The service is proactive in seeking income-generating opportunities

The service actively considers and exploits opportunities for generating extra income. For example, it anticipates it will receive £1.3m of income in 2023/24 from hosting other emergency services across its estate. It also provides fire marshal training to members of staff who work for private sector companies.

Promoting the right values and culture

Adequate

Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service is adequate at promoting the right values and culture.

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

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure all staff understand and demonstrate its values.

The service should assure itself that middle managers 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.

Main findings

The service has promoted positive culture and values, but it still needs to improve

The service has well-defined values, which most staff understand. We found that staff at most levels of the service showed behaviours that reflect service values. The service has implemented initiatives to promote its values and culture. It has published its own ground rules and leadership message to explain its aims. An external provider has provided training to all staff to supplement this.

Senior leaders act as role models. For example, senior leaders regularly visit workplaces, and staff told us that they have direct conversations with leaders and feel that they are listened to by them. In our survey, 53 percent of staff (201 of 376) told us

that they have confidence in the processes to feed back at all levels. And 53 percent (201 of 376) felt confident that their ideas or suggestions would be listened to.

However, the culture of the organisation doesn't always align with its values. Some behaviours we were told about, particularly at middle management level, didn't meet the standards expected. For example, staff told us that they have experienced (teaching) practices that don't reflect a modern workplace, and they have heard people making sexist and misogynistic comments about female colleagues and women in general.

The service needs to do more to make sure it implements the Core Code of Ethics effectively and that staff understand it. Staff don't consistently know about or understand the service's ground rules and leadership message, which incorporate the Core Code of Ethics.

Health and well-being are important to the service

The service has well-understood and effective well-being policies in place, which are available to staff. A significant range of well-being support is available for both physical and mental health. For example, the service has adopted hybrid and agile working arrangements to support work/life balance. It also provides support through defusing interventions for people who have witnessed critical incidents. There are examples of senior leaders making direct contact with individuals to provide support during periods of ill health.

The service could do more to engage with its staff and understand what else they need to support their individual needs. Around 33 percent (123 of 376) of staff who responded to our survey told us that they have never discussed their personal well-being or work-related stress with their managers.

Most staff reported that they understand and have confidence in the well-being support processes available. Staff told us that they are supported in different ways to promote their physical and mental health. This includes changes to their working patterns to help with personal challenges and support to help them recover from physical injury. Some 89 percent (333 of 376) of respondents to our survey agreed that they feel able to access services to support their mental well-being.

The service has effective health and safety arrangements

The service continues to have effective and well-understood health and safety policies and procedures in place. It has a defined structure through which trained staff provide a range of support and share their expertise. Their knowledge and understanding are aligned with their role and level of responsibility.

The health and safety function is performance managed, which includes active monitoring, and progress is formally reported on a regular basis.

The policies and procedures are readily available, and the service promotes them effectively to all staff. Staff have access to information and applicable forms through the service's intranet portal. The service has designed the process to be as easy as possible to promote the reporting of near misses, accidents and dangerous occurrences. Staff and most representative bodies have confidence in the health and safety approach the service takes. Of the staff who responded to our survey, 96 percent (360 of 376) stated that the service has clear procedures to report health and safety issues, and 93 percent (350 of 376) said that they are encouraged to report all health and safety-related matters.

The service monitors staff who have secondary employment or dual contracts to make sure they comply with the secondary employment policy and don't work excessive hours. As of 31 March 2022, 4.2 percent of firefighters in service had secondary employment and 52 percent had dual contracts within the service. The service has a clear policy to manage the effect of these contracts and make sure that there is no evidence that health, safety or well-being is compromised. The policy is managed centrally by the people and organisational development team. There is a requirement for permission to hold secondary employment to be renewed on an annual basis.

The service has effective absence management procedures

We found that there were clear processes in place to manage absences for all staff. There is clear guidance available for managers, who are confident in using the process. The service manages absences well and in accordance with policy. The service has several methods to monitor and respond to sickness trends and issues. Line managers meet with individuals to discuss support and performance where applicable.

The occupational health team analyses individual absences to identify trends and then reports to the relevant line manager. Where applicable, case management can include formal proceedings.

At a senior management level, monthly absence figures are analysed and reported through performance management meetings. The datasets include support staff, control staff and firefighting roles.

Overall absence figures are reported to several areas such as the people board, the equality, diversity and inclusion board and the strategy and performance board. Performance-related sickness statistics are also reported to the fire authority via the people board.

The absence target (currently 4 percent) wasn't met in the previous year, but overall, the service has seen a 10.9 percent decrease in long-term firefighter absences over the 12 months between 2020/21 and 2021/22.

The targeted figure is compared against benchmarking groups, such as other employers in the northwest.

Getting the right people with the right skills

Adequate

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

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

Area for improvement

The service should assure itself that it has an effective succession planning mechanism in place for all roles.

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 make further improvements to 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 IRMP. We found limited evidence that service planning allows it to fully consider workforce skills and overcome any gaps in capability. For example, the service has overarching plans to support workforce planning, but not all directorates and departments have completed detailed analysis of their teams to make sure that skills, knowledge and understanding are maintained. Because of this, the service has made limited progress in addressing the area for improvement reported in our previous inspection, and the area for improvement remains.

The service also needs to do more to improve the way it considers its future needs and succession planning. While it is introducing a high-potential programme to

supplement its existing gateway scheme, we found limited evidence that the service has a clear plan of what the organisation will look like in the future in terms of people's skills, knowledge and diversity. This is particularly important at middle and senior management levels.

Staff are trained and competent

Most staff told us that they could access the training they need to be effective in their roles. This training isn't just focused on operational skills but also includes management skills. The service is a Chartered Management Institute centre for leadership and management. All members of staff have an opportunity to access learning and achieve a level 5 institute qualification.

The service's training plans make sure it can maintain competence and capability effectively. For example, training forecasts are completed in liaison with the training administration team annually. Consideration is given to upcoming core training requirements, including how many courses and trainers are required and how many new starters there are in service. This gives the training and development academy team the forecasted number of days required to provide the training and the skills needed.

The service monitors staff competence through a range of methods including line managers' observation of safety-critical skills. This is called the safe person assessment, which involves staff practically demonstrating their skills and competence in the use of key pieces of equipment or procedures. The completion of these assessments is also monitored by the local station manager. Additionally, e-learning records and core competencies are monitored, managed and recorded by the training and development academy team. It regularly updates its understanding of staff skills and risk-critical safety capabilities. This approach means the service can identify gaps in workforce capabilities and resilience. It also means it can make sound and financially sustainable decisions about current and future needs.

Learning and improvement are co-ordinated and well managed

The service promotes a culture of continuous improvement throughout the organisation, and it encourages staff to learn and develop. For example, the operations board has overall governance and management of training requirements. Information is circulated via bulletins and health and safety notifications.

Most staff told us that they can access a range of learning and development resources. Some 80 percent of staff (301 of 376) who responded to our survey agreed that they have received sufficient training to do their jobs effectively. This includes e-learning modules, formal development and training courses and continuing professional development methods such as command seminars, coaching, mentoring and shadowing.

Staff are encouraged to be responsible for their own learning and development, and managers are accountable for supporting staff development.

Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity

Adequate

Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service is adequate at ensuring fairness and promoting diversity.

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

Area for improvement

The service should review how effective its policy on bullying, harassment and discrimination is in reducing unacceptable behaviour towards its staff.

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 and senior leaders seek feedback from staff

The service has developed several ways to work 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 initiatives to identify matters that affect different staff groups. The service has added two additional staff networks to its existing groups. The groups have senior leadership support through the sponsoring and chairing of relevant groups. Changes have recently been made to line management support, which mean that station managers have designated responsibility for either a fire station or the emergency control room as well as a role in a functional department. This helps give line managers regular and direct contact with staff to provide an

opportunity to participate in discussion about a range of subjects. A staff survey was completed at the end of 2022 that sought views, feelings and feedback from all staff.

Staff lack confidence in tackling bullying, harassment and discrimination

Many staff understand what bullying, harassment and discrimination are and their negative effects on colleagues and the organisation. But the service should improve staff's understanding of these issues and make sure that they are aware of their duty to report any incidents. In our staff survey, 20 percent (74 of 376) of staff told us they have experienced bullying or harassment, and 27 percent (100 of 376) have experienced discrimination over the past 12 months.

Although the service has clear policies and procedures in place, staff have limited confidence in its ability to deal effectively with cases of bullying, harassment and discrimination as well as grievances and discipline. Some staff told us that they have experienced discrimination or harassment but haven't reported it as they aren't confident that any action would be taken. They also fear that they would be subject to further discrimination or labelled as a troublemaker.

The service is actively addressing disproportionality in recruitment and retention

The service has put considerable effort into developing its recruitment processes so that they are fair and potential applicants can understand them. It has introduced a head of culture and inclusion role and an attractions team to recruit new staff, which includes people from under-represented groups. This has encouraged applicants from diverse backgrounds at firefighter level. There is limited evidence that there are similar initiatives for roles at middle and senior management level.

In 2021/22, 122 people were new joiners to the service and 4 percent self-declared as being from an ethnic minority background. The proportion of firefighters from an ethnic minority background increased from 6.5 percent (58 people) in 2020/21 to 6.8 percent (62 people) in 2021/22. The proportion of female firefighters increased from 11.4 percent (104 people) in 2020/21 to 12.4 percent (116 people) in 2021/22.

For the whole workforce, in 2021/22, 5.7 percent were from an ethnic minority background compared to 11.8 percent in the local population and an average of 8 percent throughout all fire and rescue services in England. For the whole workforce, 24.3 percent were women, compared to an average of 18.6 percent throughout all fire and rescue services in England.

The service has made some improvements to increasing staff diversity at some levels of the organisation but not across all functions. In 2021/22, no fire control staff and just 3 percent of support staff were from an ethnic minority background. In the same period, female staff accounted for 53 percent of support staff and 92 percent of emergency control room staff.

The service is working to improve equality, diversity and inclusion

The service has improved its approach to equality, diversity and inclusion. It makes sure it can offer the right services to its communities and can support staff with protected characteristics. For example, it supports staff with protected characteristics through its staff networks, which include fire proud, reach, gender equality, health and well-being, and neurodiversity. It has memberships with external networks, such as the Asian Fire Service Association (corporate member) and the Women in the Fire Service UK (corporate member).

The firefighter recruitment process (formed of seven stages) is clearly explained and published on the service's website. This is supplemented by social media information videos that promote a range of roles in the fire and rescue service. The service holds positive action events, which are designed and supported by firefighters at their own fire stations, to interact with the local community. This has helped the public understand the opportunities that are open to them.

The service has an effective process in place to assess equality impact. Following our 2021 inspection report, the service reviewed its processes for equality impact assessments (EIAs). The service's position now is that all policy, procedure and practice are subject to an EIA. Our inspectors found that most policies and procedures had an EIA.

An area for improvement identified in our previous inspection report stated that the service should make sure it has robust processes in place to undertake EIAs and review any actions agreed as a result. We found evidence to show that the service has made progress in addressing this area for improvement, which has now been discharged.

The process includes storing EIAs on the service intranet, which allows staff to easily access information through a portal application. Managers and function heads told us that they have received training and guidance to support them in writing EIAs. The service recognises that parts of the process can be improved – for example, the quality assurance of EIAs.

The service is a menopause and neurodiversity-friendly employer. It recently facilitated a menopause support event at its headquarters, where all staff were invited to talk about their experiences and offer support. In our survey, 96 percent (362 of 376) of respondents agreed that they have access to gender-appropriate workplace facilities.

Managing performance and developing leaders

Good

Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service is good 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.

Innovative practice

The service has introduced a development day for women

The service held an event for female employees to support their personal development. This was in response to a discussion held at the female firefighter staff forum and a request for an incident command taster session. Sessions available were decision-making, confidence building, prioritising, applying skills in risk-critical environments and methods to decompress. There were also workshops on difficult conversations, assertiveness and effectiveness.

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

Main findings

There are performance management arrangements, but contact with managers could be improved

There is a good performance management system in place that allows the service to effectively develop and assess the individual performance of all staff. For example, in addition to informal conversations, the service has a formal appraisal process that staff should complete at least once a year. Staff across the service told us that they feel the appraisal process is meaningful and contributes to their development and performance. In our survey, 91 percent (341 of 376) of respondents told us that they have had a formal personal development review or appraisal in the last 12 months.

Some staff reported that they have regular discussions with their managers and that these are meaningful. In our survey, 17 percent or respondents (65 of 376) told us that they discuss how well they are performing at work with their managers weekly, while 29 percent (110 of 376) discuss it monthly, 12 percent (46 of 376) quarterly and 27 percent (100 out of 376) annually. But 15 percent (55 of 376) of respondents told us that they have never discussed how well they are performing at work with their managers.

Each staff member has individual goals and objectives, and they receive regular performance assessments. Staff feel confident in the performance and development arrangements in place.

Fairness in promotion and progression processes could be improved

The service needs to do more to assure itself and staff that its promotion and progression processes are fair. The service's promotion and progression policy is limited and doesn't explain how it makes sure that processes are fair, open and transparent. For example, it doesn't explain whether vacancies and roles should be advertised internally, externally or both. The policy doesn't provide the reader with information to help them understand the promotion process.

Some members of staff perceive that the promotion process at middle management level and above discriminates against some sections of the organisation. There is recognition of this at a senior level in the service, and there have been offers to meet with individuals who feel that the process is unfair.

The service uses temporary promotions appropriately to fill short-term resourcing gaps. In March 2022, the average length of time for temporary promotion was 262 days. This is a reduction on the service's figure of 429 days which was reported in 2021 and is lower than the average of 300 days across all fire and rescue services in England.

The service is improving development of leadership and high-potential staff at all levels.

The service knows it needs to go further to increase workforce diversity, especially in middle and senior management. It tends to fill these positions internally, so it isn't making the most of opportunities to make its workforce more representative.

It has put in place plans to address this. These include the recent introduction of a high-potential programme. The programme is in its early stages and not all staff we spoke to were aware of the opportunities it provides. However, managers and leaders have identified people from across the service, including many from under-represented groups, who they feel would be suitable to join the programme. This should encourage applicants from diverse backgrounds into middle and senior management positions.

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