

Fire & Rescue Service 2023–25

Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of Shropshire 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
Areas for improvement	9
Main findings	9
Protecting the public through fire regulation	13
Areas for improvement	13
Main findings	13
Responding to fires and other emergencies	18
Area for improvement	18
Main findings	18
Responding to major and multi-agency incidents	22
Areas for improvement	22
Main findings	22
Making best use of resources	26
Cause of concern	26
Areas for improvement	27
Main findings	27
Making the fire and rescue service affordable now and in the future	32
Areas for improvement	32
Main findings	33

Promoting the right values and culture	36
Areas for improvement	36
Main findings	37
Getting the right people with the right skills	40
Areas for improvement	40
Main findings	41
Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity	43
Areas for improvement	43
Main findings	44
Managing performance and developing leaders	47
Areas for improvement	47
Main findings	48

Changes to this round of inspection

We last inspected Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service in December 2021. And in July 2022, 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 Shropshire 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 Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service has performed in 11 areas. We have made the following graded judgments:

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

I am grateful for the positive and constructive way in which Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service staff engaged with our inspection team. And I acknowledge the challenging and uncertain environment at the time of our inspection in June and July 2024. The chief fire officer and an assistant chief fire officer were absent and facing allegations of inappropriate behaviour in the workplace. The inspection team paid careful regard to these circumstances while using the same methodology we apply during every inspection wherever possible.

However, I have concerns about the performance of Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service in keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks. In particular, I have serious concerns about its use of resources.

We were disappointed to see that the service hasn't made the progress we expected since our 2021 inspection despite having a good basis to build on. Only 3 of the 16 areas for improvement identified last time have been suitably addressed. Many other areas have deteriorated, particularly in relation to efficiency and the service's people.

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

- The service isn't managing its resources well, which is a cause of concern in relation to the scrutiny of financial decisions, transparency around the funding of capital projects, and performance management arrangements.
- The service needs to do more to improve its culture as, despite commissioning an independent review, it hasn't progressed any of the recommendations, and some behaviour isn't in line with service values.
- The service hasn't made enough progress on equality, diversity and inclusion, and has issues with [equality impact assessments](#) and lack of confidence in processes tackling bullying, [harassment](#) and discrimination, and for promotion.
- The service needs to do more to make sure it has the right skills and capacity to successfully manage change in the future, including in areas such as estates, information and communication technology (ICT) and project management.

In view of these findings, I have been in regular contact with the acting deputy chief fire officer as I do not underestimate how much improvement is needed. I will keep in close contact with the service to monitor its progress in addressing the cause of concern and associated recommendations.



Andy Cooke

HM Chief Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Service in numbers



Profile

	Shropshire	England
Area Square miles	1,347	50,370
Population (thousands) 30 June 2022	516	57,106
Population density Thousands per square mile	0.4	1.1



Cost

Funding Year ending 31 March 2023	£25.4m	£2.5bn
Expenditure per population Year ending 31 March 2023	£54.27	£46.66

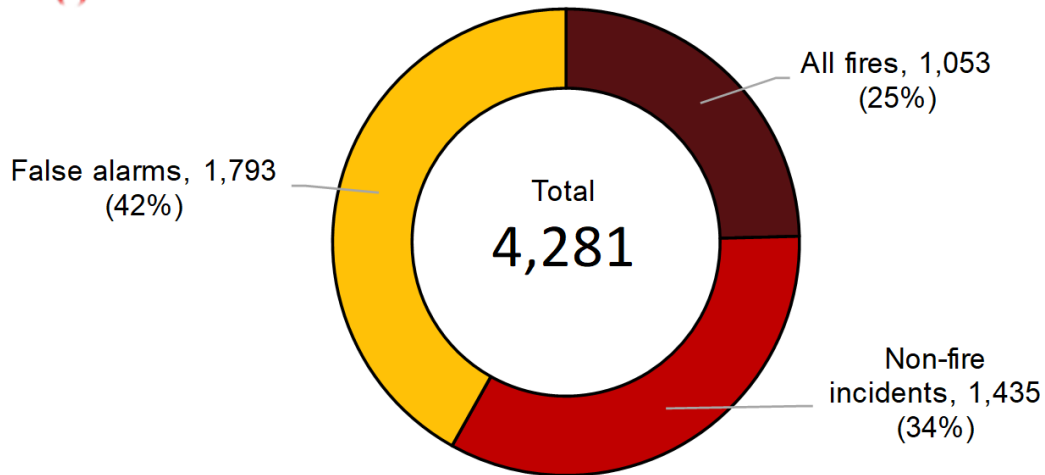


Response

Incidents attended per 1,000 population Year ending 31 December 2023	8.3	10.4
Home fire safety checks carried out by fire and rescue service per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2023	7.7	9.3
Fire safety audits per 100 known premises Year ending 31 March 2023	3.6	2.0
Availability of wholetime pumps Year ending 31 March 2023	99.0%	
Availability of on-call pumps Year ending 31 March 2023	86.4%	



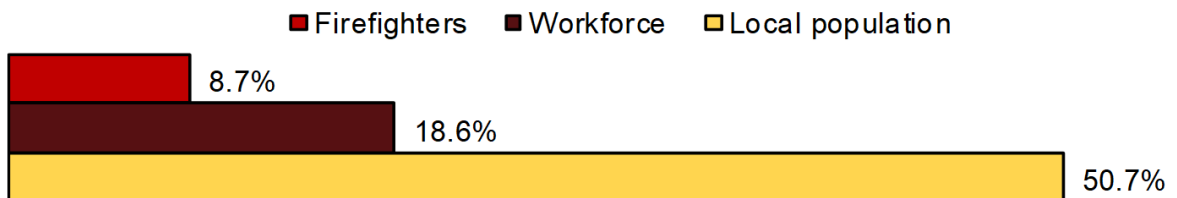
Incidents attended in year ending 31 December 2023



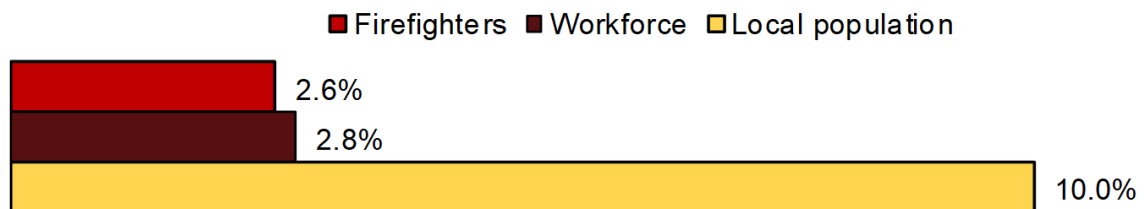
Workforce

	Shropshire	England
Five-year change in total workforce 2018 to 2023	-6.2%	1.4%
Number of firefighters per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2023	0.91	0.61
Percentage of firefighters who are wholetime Year ending 31 March 2023	39.2%	65.5%

Percentage of firefighters, workforce and population who identified as a woman as at 31 March 2023



Percentage of firefighters, workforce and population who were from ethnic minority backgrounds as at 31 March 2023



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

Shropshire 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 continues to identify risk well

The service has assessed a suitable range of risks and threats using a thorough [community risk management plan \(CRMP\)](#). In 2023, the service refreshed the analysis of fire cover carried out in 2020 using specialist risk management consultants. It extended the scope of the review to include fire engines that can fight fires and rescue people at greater heights. In its assessment of risk, it uses information it has collected from a broad range of internal and external sources and datasets. This includes horizon scanning, and qualitative analysis based on [PESTELO](#) risk assessment methodology. We were told that the service has signed an agreement with the University of Leeds to apply artificial intelligence to its CRMP data analysis to improve risk identification. We will be interested to see how this collaboration progresses.

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. The current CRMP is now in its last year. The service is developing its 2025–29 CRMP underpinned by a comprehensive communications plan. It has consulted with staff, emergency service partners and the two local authorities (Shropshire Council and Telford & Wrekin Council). The service also has plans to consult community groups before a full public consultation. These include [independent](#)

[advisory groups](#) that work closely with West Mercia Police. The service has already received good feedback from emergency service partners and local authorities before going to full consultation.

The service has an effective CRMP

Once it has assessed risks, the service records its findings in an easily understood CRMP. 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 both now and in the future.

The current CRMP (2021–25) is in its final year. In this period, the service has fulfilled some of its main objectives, such as:

- implementing a more meaningful response standard for fires and other emergencies;
- providing increased protection team resources to improve targeting of risk; and
- increasing prevention capacity to target the changing rural risk.

The service has improved its processes to manage risk information

In our 2021 inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that: “The service should make sure its firefighters and fire control staff have good access to relevant and up-to-date risk information.” We were pleased to see that the service has addressed this.

We found that the service routinely collects and updates the information it has about the highest-risk people, places and threats it has identified. These include premises such as military establishments and heritage buildings. Short-term risk information, such as information about the Telford balloon festival, is also effectively collected and shared with staff.

We sampled a broad range of the site-specific risk information (SSRI) the service has collected and holds within its risk management system. We found that the information gathered is presented in a consistent and easily understandable format that allows crews to readily review it at operational incidents. All SSRI records are accessible to prevention, protection and [fire control](#) staff.

We found that the service has effective arrangements in place to manage the approximately 750 SSRI records it holds. It has efficient methods in place to make sure that inspection records are uploaded promptly on to fire engine [mobile data terminals](#).

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 builds understanding of risk from operational activity

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

Staff told us that there are effective processes in place to update them on high-risk SSRI locations in their areas. When SSRI is updated after a visit, staff review the changes and consider how to update other staff. Staff from all stations told us that they had completed visits to familiarise themselves with high-risk sites. Many told us they had also completed locally arranged exercises and training at these locations.

The corporate risk register needs better controls

The service has a corporate risk register that outlines its significant risks. The register lacks detail on the way it categorises the risks identified. Also, some of the risks aren't effectively managed or mitigated. For example, there are several risks related to ICT that were added to the register many years ago and don't have suitable controls or countermeasures. The service should re-evaluate the management of the corporate risk register to make sure that risks are effectively recorded and controlled.

Preventing fires and other risks

Adequate

Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service is adequate 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.

Areas for improvement

The service should evaluate its prevention activity so it understands what is most effective.

The service should make sure its quality assures its prevention activity so staff carry out [safe and well visits](#) to an appropriate standard.

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

Main findings

The service's prevention strategy aligns with its community risk management plan

The service's prevention strategy 2023–25 is clearly linked to the risks it has identified in its CRMP.

The risks identified include:

- people living alone with pre-existing impairments;
- young or large families living in deprivation;
- travel distances in remote rural areas;

- a significant rise in the elderly population; and
- the migration of new communities to the area.

The service's teams work well together and with other organisations on prevention, and they share relevant information when needed. The prevention team has worked closely with GP surgeries to offer safe and well visits and share targeted fire safety information to people considered [vulnerable](#) and at greater risk of fire. This includes highlighting the fire risk of emollient creams on bedding and nightwear.

The service uses information to adjust its planning assumptions and direct activity between its prevention, protection and response functions. For example, the service has electronic forms that staff in prevention and protection can use to submit risk information, which may have an impact on operational response.

Home Office data for the year ending 31 March 2023 shows that the service carried out more safe and well visits than the overall rate in England (8.6 compared to 5.35 per 1,000 population). In total, the service completed 4,461 safe and well visits, which is higher than previous years.

Prevention activity is targeted at people most at risk

The service uses a risk-based approach to clearly prioritise its prevention activity towards people most at risk from fire and other emergencies. Safe and well visits are completed based on an assessment of vulnerability and risk. Prevention staff focus on high-risk visits and referrals from partner agencies such as local authorities, care providers, GP surgeries and the Red Cross. Operational staff receive a list of addresses each month based on an analysis of data. Some staff told us that the homes visited didn't always meet the service's criteria for vulnerability.

The service uses a broad range of information and data to target its prevention activity at vulnerable individuals and groups. For example, health sector partners provide vulnerability data, known as [Open Exeter](#) data. The service uses socioeconomic data to help assess areas with the highest risk of [dwelling fires](#). Wards defined as high risk are detailed in the tactical plan and updated regularly based on any changes. The service directs prevention work to remote areas that can't be reached within its standard response targets.

The service carries out a range of interventions that it adapts to the level of risk in its communities. It has adjusted its safe and well visits to respond to emerging risks in the home, such as the increase in open fires for heating, and fires involving lithium-ion batteries in bicycles and scooters.

Most staff feel competent in carrying out safe and well visits, but the service is still ineffective in quality assuring that work

Staff told us they have the right skills and confidence to make safe and well visits. These visits cover an appropriate range of hazards that can put vulnerable people at greater risk from fire and other emergencies. Staff on the specialist prevention team receive enhanced training and regular [continuing professional development](#). This includes awareness training on [county lines](#), [sexual exploitation](#) and dementia.

In our 2021 inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that: “The service should make sure it quality assures prevention activity, so staff carry out safe and well visits to an appropriate standard.” However, in this inspection we found that the service has made insufficient progress. This remains an area for improvement.

In particular, we found ineffective quality assurance of prevention work after incidents. We reviewed several serious and fatal fires, and identified a range of inconsistencies and a failure to follow service procedures.

The service is good at responding to safeguarding concerns

Most staff we interviewed told us about occasions when they had identified [safeguarding](#) concerns. They told us they feel confident and trained to act appropriately and refer promptly where appropriate.

Staff complete mandatory online safeguarding training. Specialist prevention staff also complete Level 2 safeguarding qualification refresher training from an external provider every three years. There are a range of other awareness courses around different vulnerabilities that staff can access.

During our review of safe and well visit files, we found that staff made appropriate referrals to other agencies where additional vulnerability and issues were identified. This included referrals to adult social care and Shropshire Council’s hard-of-hearing team. Staff maintained appropriate documentation and records of the referrals.

The service continues to work well with its partners

The service continues to work well with a wide range of other organisations to prevent fires and other emergencies.

We found good evidence that it routinely refers people at greatest risk to organisations that may better meet their needs. These organisations include START (the NHS Short Term Assessment and Reablement Team), care agencies and local authority social care teams. In 2022/23, the service made 413 referrals to other agencies following prevention visits. This is an increase from 278 in the previous year. It also has arrangements to receive referrals from other organisations. In 2022/23, the service received 1,300 referrals from other agencies for prevention visits. This is an increase from 931 in 2021/22. And the service acts appropriately on the referrals it

receives by evaluating the information and scheduling a safe and well visit or other appropriate intervention.

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, the service actively works to reduce road and water risks. Staff told us about a broad range of campaigns and activity including road safety events in schools for older people and [Biker Down](#) emergency response training for motorcyclists. A recent campaign – Bring Your A-Game – has been introduced, aiming to reduce the number of people killed or seriously injured on rural A roads across the county.

Staff also work with the Royal National Lifeboat Institute to provide water safety and first responder training in Shrewsbury.

The service works to reduce deliberate fire-setting

The service has a range of suitable and effective interventions to target and educate people who show signs of fire-setting behaviour. Prevention officers provide an educational package, It's Too Late Now, that covers arson and hoax calls to individuals or groups.

When appropriate, the service shares information with other organisations, such as West Mercia Police, or through [multi-agency risk assessment conferences](#). We were encouraged to find that the level of deliberate fires in the service area was much lower than the overall England rate.

Evaluation processes haven't improved

During our 2021 inspection, we highlighted as an area for improvement: “The service should evaluate its prevention work, so it understands what works.” The service hasn't made enough progress in addressing this. It remains an area for improvement.

We were told that the service has considered its evaluation processes and is awaiting implementation of the new [National Fire Chiefs Council \(NFCC\)](#) person-centred approach to prevention activity, which is due in April 2025. The service has evaluated some prevention activities, such as its visits to schools and reviews of fatal fires.

However, we found limited evidence of improvement in how the service evaluates the effectiveness of its other activities or makes sure all its communities get appropriate access to prevention activity that meets their needs. The service hasn't reviewed or evaluated partnerships to increase referrals and identify improvements. As a result, the service is missing opportunities to improve its prevention work for the public.

Protecting the public through fire regulation

Requires improvement

Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement 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.

Areas for improvement

The service should regularly monitor and check compliance with prohibition and enforcement notices that have been served.

The service should make sure it effectively addresses the burden of false alarms.

The service should make sure it has an effective quality assurance process, so staff carry out audits to an appropriate standard.

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

Main findings

The protection strategy has limited links with the community risk management plan

The service's protection policies are linked to the risks it has identified in its CRMP. They set out how the service will mitigate these risks by carrying out inspections to make sure of compliance with fire safety legislation and by carrying out enforcement action when deemed necessary.

However, we did find that there is limited alignment between the service's protection, prevention and response functions. Information isn't routinely exchanged, and protection work generally happens in isolation rather than across the whole service. The introduction of Level 3 Diploma in Fire Safety training for operational staff that we highlighted in our last inspection has had limited impact in making premises safer and reducing the risk of fire in non-domestic premises. We found a lack of clarity about how this investment in extra training will improve the service's effectiveness and efficiency.

The service has updated its risk-based inspection programme and targets high-risk premises

The service's risk-based inspection programme is focused on the service's highest-risk buildings. The service updated this programme in December 2023 and determined risk levels for all known non-domestic premises in Shropshire. The service uses a new methodology and datasets to calculate risk scores. The service told us that it is on schedule to inspect all 1,162 high-risk premises within the three-year cycle it has set itself. This equates to 387 high-risk premises every year.

The fire safety audits we reviewed had been completed within the service's timescales. The service reported that it had completed 394 high-risk audits between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024.

However, we did find that the proportion of unsatisfactory audits is relatively low. Unsatisfactory audits require some form of intervention to improve fire safety compliance in premises to make buildings safer for the people who use them. Home Office data for the year ending 31 March 2024 shows that 17.5 percent (82 out of 469) of the fire safety audits carried out were unsatisfactory. This suggests the service could improve its targeting. The quality of completed fire safety audits is inconsistent.

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 interim risk-based inspection programme;
- after fires at premises where fire safety legislation applies;
- after enforcement action had been taken; or
- at high-rise, high-risk buildings.

Not all the audits we reviewed had been completed in a consistent, systematic way or in line with the service's policies. For example, in some of the files we sampled, the fire safety inspector had changed the outcome of the audit without providing the necessary justification. We also found that the post-audit process wasn't always followed.

We found limited evidence the service makes relevant information from its audits available to operational teams and control room operators.

We also found that formal notices we sampled, such as enforcement and prohibition notices, hadn't been followed up to check compliance. For example, we reviewed an enforcement notice issued in November 2023, with work to be completed by 1 March 2024. We inspected the file almost four months after the work should have been completed and there was no indication follow-up inspections were planned. This sends out the wrong message to people who don't take fire safety legislation seriously. This is an area for improvement.

Quality assurance processes remain ineffective

During our 2021 inspection, we highlighted as an area for improvement that the service "should make sure it has an effective quality assurance process, so staff can carry out audits to an appropriate standard". The service hasn't made enough progress in addressing this. It remains an area for improvement.

The service carries out limited quality assurance of its protection work. We were pleased to see that in September 2023, it introduced an internal quality assurance process to review audits. However, we found that only 15 reviews had been carried out.

The service doesn't always use the full range of its enforcement powers where necessary

The service doesn't use its full range of enforcement powers consistently. We found it doesn't always take appropriate steps to prosecute those who don't comply with fire safety regulations.

In the year ending 31 March 2024, the service issued 1 alteration notice, 74 informal notifications, 8 enforcement notices and 14 prohibition notices, and carried out no prosecutions. It hasn't completed any prosecutions since 2016/17. At the time of the inspection, the service told us that it had three current cases that may lead to legal action.

Home Office data shows that there were three satisfactory audits of premises carried out following enforcement action. The service isn't checking that appropriate corrective work has been completed or taking further enforcement action to enforce compliance.

There are enough staff to meet the requirements of the service's risk-based inspection programme

We were pleased to see that the service has enough qualified protection staff to meet the requirements of its risk-based inspection programme. Staff get the right training and work to appropriate accreditation, with regular continuing professional development. This helps the service provide the range of audit and enforcement activity needed, both now and in the future.

The service has met its CRMP aim to increase the number of protection inspection officers with a Level 4 Diploma in Fire Safety from 9 to 12. We were also encouraged to find that the service has suitable arrangements to respond out of hours to fire safety complaints or requests for assistance.

The service is adapting to new legislation

Since our last inspection, the [Building Safety Act 2022](#) and the [Fire Safety \(England\) Regulations 2022](#) have been introduced to bring about better regulation and management of tall buildings.

The service is supporting the introduction of the [Building Safety Regulator](#). It expects these arrangements to have a limited impact on its other protection activity due to the few high-rise residential premises it has within Shropshire.

The Fire Safety (England) 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 it of any substantial faults to essential firefighting equipment, such as firefighting lifts. We found the service has good arrangements in place to receive this information.

The service works effectively with other enforcement agencies

The service works closely with other enforcement agencies to regulate fire safety, and it routinely exchanges risk information with them. There is an effective working relationship with a local authority event [safety advisory group](#) to make sure that large public events are safe. Both the service and local authority have access to a central website that helps partners to easily review information and work together effectively.

The service also actively takes part in intelligence-led inspection and enforcement activity with a wide range of organisations inspecting premises jointly. This initiative, known as MATES (multi-agency targeted enforcement strategy), is co-ordinated by West Mercia Police.

The service responds well to building and licensing consultations

The service responds to most building and licensing consultations on time. This means it consistently meets its statutory responsibility to comment on fire safety arrangements at new and altered buildings. In the year ending 31 March 2024, the service responded to 91.7 percent of building consultations and 100 percent of licensing consultations within the required time frames.

The service could do more to work with businesses

The service could do more to work with local businesses and other organisations to promote compliance with fire safety legislation. We were told that the staff members who had previously co-ordinated work with the business community have left the service and nobody has taken on the role. Consequently, there has been a reduction in the support provided. The service does provide some information through its website and the chamber of commerce. But we heard that fire safety seminars are no longer held, and the service could do more to communicate with different business groups.

The service hasn't done enough to reduce unwanted fire signals

During our 2021 inspection, we highlighted as an area for improvement that the service should address the burden of false alarms. In this inspection, we found the service is taking only limited action to reduce the number of unwanted fire signals. This remains an area for improvement.

The service began a trial on 1 June 2024 to try to reduce false fire signals, but it is too early to identify any sustained improvements.

In the year ending 31 March 2024, the service attended 1,855 false alarms. In total, 43.3 percent of its emergency incidents were automatic fire alarms, which is higher than the overall England rate of 42.3 percent. This means fire engines may not be available to respond to genuine incidents because they are attending false alarms. It also creates a risk to the public if more fire engines travel at high speed on the roads to respond to these incidents.

Responding to fires and other emergencies

Adequate

Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service is adequate 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.

Area for improvement

The service should make sure it has an effective system for learning from operational incidents.

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

Main findings

The service doesn't have an up-to-date response strategy

The response strategy the service is using (2018–20) is four years out of date and isn't clearly linked to the risks identified in its CRMP.

The service couldn't always explain the rationale for the location of all its fire engines, response staff and working patterns. The response standards in its strategy have been superseded by the standards that were introduced in the 2021–25 CRMP.

The response standards set by the service are being met

There are no national response standards of performance for the public. But the service has set out its own response standards in its CRMP. In the 2021–25 CRMP, the service revised its response standards to make them clearer for the public. It changed the response categories from high, medium and low to categories that reflect where people live, namely urban, town and fringe, and rural.

The standards the service set are:

- urban – first fire engine to arrive in 10 minutes;
- town and fringe – first fire engine to arrive in 15 minutes; and
- rural – first fire engine to arrive in 20 minutes.

It aims to achieve these times on 85 percent of occasions.

The service consistently meets its standards. The service's internal performance reporting for 2023/24 recorded that it met its response standards on 94 percent of occasions.

Home Office data shows that in the year ending 31 March 2023, the service's response time to [primary fires](#) was 10 minutes and 57 seconds. This is marginally faster than the average response of comparable, predominantly rural services in England of 11 minutes and 5 seconds.

Fire engine availability remains at a good level

To support its response strategy, the service aims to have 100 percent of fire engines available on 100 percent of occasions. The service doesn't always meet this challenging standard for availability.

The service's overall availability for 2023/24 was 87.5 percent, with [wholetime](#) availability at 98.7 percent and [on-call](#) availability at 85.1 percent.

The service is aware that this good performance could drop and is trying to introduce measures such as additional work contract options to sustain on-call availability.

Staff have a good understanding of how to command incidents safely

The service has trained incident commanders, who are assessed regularly and properly. In the year ending 31 March 2024, all level 1, 2, 3 and 4 incident commanders (162 in total) had been accredited. Regular continuing professional development takes place in between the formal assessments every two years. 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 \(JESIP\)](#).

Control staff could have more involvement in training, exercises and debriefs

We were disappointed to find that the service's control staff aren't always included in its command, training, exercise, debrief and assurance activity. Control staff have been involved in a recent [local resilience forum](#) power outage exercise, but aren't routinely involved in other service training exercises. Fire control staff carry out internal debriefs on a regular basis, but they are similarly not routinely involved in debriefs with operational staff.

Staff have good access to risk information

We sampled a range of risk information stored on the service's central database and on mobile data terminals, including the information in place for firefighters responding to incidents at high-risk, high-rise buildings and the information held by fire control.

The information we reviewed was up to date and detailed. Staff could easily access and understand it. Encouragingly, it had been completed with input from the service's prevention, protection and response functions when appropriate. For example, fire control staff had access to evacuation strategies at high-rise residential buildings.

The service is still not effectively learning from operational incidents

During our 2021 inspection, we highlighted as an area for improvement that the service should make sure it has an effective system for learning from operational incidents. Disappointingly, not enough progress has been made. It remains an area for improvement.

Encouragingly, the service has introduced a new electronic tool to co-ordinate and track debrief submissions and share other learning after incidents. Many staff spoke positively about this new system.

As part of the inspection, we reviewed a range of emergency incidents and training events. These include domestic and commercial property fires and a serious road traffic collision.

We found that [hot debriefs](#) are consistently carried out immediately after incidents, but there are few structured debriefs.

We were disappointed to find that the service doesn't always act on learning it has, or should have, identified from incidents. This means it isn't routinely improving its service to the public. There were significant incidents, such as fatal fires and fires in hotels and large agricultural buildings, with limited debrief submissions, and resulting actions were inadequately tracked.

Communication with the public during incidents could be improved

The service doesn't have good systems in place to inform the public about ongoing incidents and help keep them safe during and after incidents.

There is no formal arrangement for support from the communications team outside normal working hours. Fire control and operational officers have access to the service's social media accounts. However, they post about a limited number of incidents. And when details are shared, we found the messaging isn't always timely and doesn't always include prevention messages.

We also heard that the service has some capacity issues, affecting its ability to attend local resilience forum warn and inform meetings. This could limit the service's ability to communicate public safety messages jointly with other agencies at times of ongoing incidents such as wide area flooding.

Responding to major and multi-agency incidents

Adequate

Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service is adequate 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).

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure its method of sharing [fire survival guidance](#) information with multiple callers is understood by staff and is well tested.

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.

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 has plans to deal with wildfires and flooding.

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 illegal or poorly managed waste sites and large industrial plants. Firefighters have access to risk information from neighbouring services. SSRI files are received from neighbouring services through the national emergency services portal [Resilience Direct](#). Premises located within 10 km of a service border are placed on the risk management system, which can be accessed by operational staff through fire engine mobile data terminals.

The service's ability to respond to major and multi-agency incidents could be improved

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 prepared the service is to respond to a major incident at a tall building, such as the tragedy at [Grenfell Tower](#).

At this type of incident, a fire and rescue service would receive a high volume of simultaneous fire calls. During this inspection, we evaluated the service's systems for sharing fire survival guidance information and reviewed how its control room directly communicates with the incident commander.

We found the service has some well-developed policies and procedures in place for safely managing this type of incident. These include procedures for fighting fires at tall and complex buildings. There is a policy stating arrangements for communicating and recording fire survival guidance information through an electronic system, known as Unblur, procured by the service.

We found that the Unblur system is an appropriate method to receive and manage a high volume of fire survival guidance calls. But we were disappointed to find that there is no strategy to make sure staff are trained in its use.

There is a lack of realistic training and exercises at tall buildings. The service has a small number of tall residential buildings compared to other services, but this doesn't negate the need for effective training and exercises.

Firefighters we spoke to have a good level of familiarity with the Unblur system. But testing of the system has been limited, and it has only been used in simulated exercises. These didn't incorporate realistic elements, such as receiving information from fire control or using the system on the command support unit deployed at larger incidents. It was also unclear in the service response strategy which station or staff would manage use of the system at an incident.

The service works well with other fire and rescue services

The service supports other fire and rescue services in responding to emergency incidents. It is intraoperable with the five services it borders and can form part of a multi-agency response.

The service has resources to support a major incident, such as a high-volume pump and rescue boats. Staff we spoke to were clear about when and how to deploy these resources.

Cross-border exercises aren't co-ordinated across the service

The service has an exercise strategy that includes limited arrangements to carry out a series of training and exercises with neighbouring fire and rescue services. The strategy lacks detail and doesn't include the risks of major events at which the service could foreseeably give support or ask for help from neighbouring services.

Staff told us that although some cross-border exercises take place, they are usually arranged locally, and there isn't a co-ordinated approach across the service. We spoke to some firefighters who haven't completed any recent cross-border exercises despite being located near a border with another service area.

The service exercise strategy needs to be better managed so that cross-border exercises are planned, tracked and debriefed, and that the learning is shared. Only limited learning from these exercises is used to inform risk information and service plans.

Incident commanders have a good understanding of JESIP

The incident commanders we interviewed had been trained in and were familiar with JESIP. Staff complete an annual training package to refresh their knowledge.

The service could give us strong evidence that it consistently follows these principles. This includes incident commanders routinely using the joint decision model when liaising with other agencies. This means that the service can be sure there is shared situational awareness and that everyone is aligning with JESIP effectively.

But the service isn't carrying out robust debriefs after multi-agency incidents and exercises. This means it may not be identifying any problems it has with applying JESIP. This could compromise the service's ability to respond effectively with other emergency organisations when major incidents do occur.

The service is an active and valued member of the local resilience forum

The service has good arrangements in place to respond to emergencies with its partners that make up the West Mercia local resilience forum. These arrangements include planning for major incidents, such as wide area flooding within the county and wider region.

The service is a valued partner in the forum. It takes part in regular training events with other members and uses the learning to develop planning assumptions about responding to major and multi-agency incidents. The service has a multi-agency exercise plan with the forum.

The service shares and contributes to national learning

The service makes sure it knows about national operational updates from other fire and rescue 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 service passes identified learning to the operational policy department to act on. This may involve changes to training, procedures or guidance. A tracker monitors progress. The service communicates learning to staff through urgent safety notices or the weekly staff bulletin. However, the service can't check whether all staff have read them.

The service hasn't improved staff training and exercises on marauding terrorist attacks

During our 2021 inspection, we highlighted as an area for improvement that the service should make sure it is well prepared to form part of a multi-agency response to a terrorist incident and that its procedures for responding are understood by all staff and are well tested. In this inspection, we found that insufficient progress has been made. This remains an area for improvement.

We recognise that in the event of a marauding terrorist attack (MTA), a specialist team would be [mobilised](#) from neighbouring fire and rescue services using [mutual aid](#). However, many firefighters and managers told us they don't know what their role would be during an MTA incident. In addition, we found that not all staff have completed the service's online MTA training package and there is limited understanding of the MTA joint operating principles.

Making best use of resources

Inadequate

Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service is inadequate 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's revenue budget for 2024/25 is £29.18 million. This is a 9.8 percent increase from the previous financial year.

Cause of concern

The service doesn't have adequate processes, controls or internal governance arrangements in place to manage strategic risks, performance and improvement plans.

Recommendations

The service should develop an action plan to make sure:

- there are appropriate strategic oversight arrangements in place to manage risks, performance and improvement plans effectively;
- the corporate risk register is actively used to mitigate and manage known risks;
- all processes in place to support performance management are effective;
- it has access to accurate data and analysis to support effective performance management; and
- it has robust processes for reporting accurate and suitably detailed finance and risk information to the [fire and rescue authority](#).

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure that it is taking steps to reduce non-pay costs and can show how it is achieving value for money.

The service should make sure it has appropriate business continuity arrangements in place, regularly review the arrangements and test them to make sure they take account of all foreseeable threats and risks.

The service should make sure it effectively monitors, reviews and evaluates the benefits and outcomes of any collaboration activity.

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 ineffective at managing resources and risk

We found that the service's medium-term financial plan is based on reasonable funding and cost assumptions. And the service has set a balanced budget for 2024/25.

However, our inspection identified ineffective processes, controls and internal governance arrangements in place to manage strategic risks. For example, the corporate risk register is ineffectively managed. The register contains a range of risks that have been included for a considerable time, but they don't have suitable controls in place. These include the security and resilience of the IT network and the lack of quality information and data to help managers make effective decisions.

Worryingly, during our inspection we identified that there had been a potential data breach with reports of a loss of medical records by an occupational health provider. We advised that this should be reported promptly to the Information Commissioner's Office.

The service sometimes uses its resources well through its medium-term financial plan to manage risk, but there are several weaknesses that need to be addressed, such as ICT and operational training resources.

Staff across the service expressed serious concerns about the poor and worsening state of the operational training centre facilities. This has a potential impact on operational effectiveness. Staff told us that funding to refurbish training facilities was initially included in the scheme to redevelop Telford fire station, but it later became clear the training facilities weren't included. Staff feel that the increase in costs for the new station have prevented improvement to training facilities. At the time of our inspection, there were no plans to redevelop the training centre.

The service's financial and workforce plans, including the allocation of resources to prevention, protection and response, aren't consistent with the risks and priorities identified in its CRMP. The service doesn't have an effective workforce plan. It hasn't completed the resource review highlighted as a main objective in the CRMP.

Financial controls need to be improved so the service uses public money well. Financing arrangements for the Telford fire station redevelopment are unclear and lack transparency. The original plan was to finance the scheme predominantly using reserves. However, the construction has been beset by a series of problems, and the scheme has gone significantly over time and budget. The service will now need to borrow to finance a large element of the overall costs.

But we found the service had provided varying financial information to fire and rescue authority members, who are responsible for overseeing financial decision-making. At the time of our inspection, the public hadn't been told about the increase in costs.

The service recognises the need to improve oversight of financial management. At the time of the inspection, it had presented outline proposals to the fire and rescue authority to address this. The service should make sure that financing and cost-management arrangements for Telford fire station and future investments, such as its command and control project, are robustly reviewed to make sure they are value for money.

The service should do more to make sure its workforce is productive

The service doesn't understand how it uses its wholetime firefighters. It doesn't collect data on how they spend their time across day and night shifts. And it doesn't make the most of its capacity. For example, the service sets targets for wholetime stations to complete safe and well visits, but there is limited management of how many visits are achieved. The service doesn't use effective station work plans with appropriate performance management measures. These could include completed SSRI and risk familiarisation visits, training exercises and response time performance.

The service should do more to make sure its workforce is as productive as possible. This includes considering new ways of working. The service hasn't evaluated its mix of crewing and duty systems. There has been limited analysis of whether current systems provide value for money or manage risk efficiently. This is despite the service having introduced self-rostering and crew-based training recently to increase productivity and reduce the need for overtime.

We found that the service relies too much on overtime. It has high levels of overtime costs compared with other services. Overtime rates in recent years have increased. In 2022/23 the service's overtime spend per head of workforce was £766. In 2021/22 it was £713, but in 2020/21 it was £267, and in 2019/20 it was £344.

The service needs to do more to make sure that its performance management processes are effective

The service's arrangements for managing its performance are weak and don't clearly link resource use to its annual plan and service aims. There are insufficient internal governance, oversight and assurance processes.

For example, the annual plan for 2022/23 highlighted a series of reviews that the service would carry out as strategic priorities. These included reviews of:

- operational resource, to make sure response matches risk;
- operational technology, to make improvements in incident command and firefighter safety;
- training facilities, to determine the future needs of the service; and
- service improvement data and intelligence, to improve decision-making and performance management.

However, we identified that the service has made limited progress with these reviews and other key service objectives within the annual plan. The service isn't routinely monitoring or actively managing the performance of service improvement plans.

Inefficient systems and processes prevent performance management arrangements being effective, such as the limited scope of the service's corporate performance indicators. It is also difficult to obtain accurate, timely information/data from the various incompatible ICT systems, which limits the ability of managers to address performance problems.

In addition, the service doesn't have clear processes to manage the performance of its workforce. It provides limited training to support managers to confidently manage performance. We identified that managers at all levels were reluctant to have what are perceived to be difficult conversations with staff about their performance.

The service collaborates with others but needs to review and evaluate this work

We were pleased to see that the service carries out activity to support its statutory duty to collaborate. It considers opportunities to collaborate with other emergency responders. For example, it works with the ambulance service to help enter premises if there are concerns for occupants' welfare. We also found it jointly purchased light vehicles with West Mercia Police.

However, the service can do more to consider and participate in collaborative activities. It was disappointing that opportunities for collaboration and co-location with other emergency services in the Telford fire station redevelopment haven't been realised. Additionally, we found that the strategic alliance with Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service hasn't been successful in meeting many of its objectives, for example in building ICT capacity and resilience, and procurement.

The service needs to do more to monitor, review and evaluate the benefits and results of its collaborations. Its current reviews and evaluation are limited in scope. The service doesn't learn from them to make sure it achieves value for money.

The service is working on a joint command and control system with three other fire and rescue services (Hereford and Worcester, County Durham and Darlington, and Cleveland). This collaboration aims to provide increased resilience by helping the services to take emergency calls for each other and mobilise resources when necessary. We look forward to seeing this project progress and to reviewing the service's evaluation of the benefits achieved and lessons learned from this work.

Business continuity arrangements need to be improved

The service has gaps in its continuity arrangements for areas in which it considers threats and risks to be high.

We identified this as an area for improvement in 2021, and we were disappointed to find that limited progress has been made. For example, in fire control there are several business continuity arrangements in place, such as for a power failure. But we found that these plans aren't reviewed or tested regularly. This means staff aren't fully aware of the arrangements and their associated responsibilities. This remains an area for improvement.

The service needs to assure itself that it is providing value for money

The service has taken some action to reduce non-pay costs, but this is limited and isn't supported by regular reviews and scrutiny. In early 2024, the service commissioned an independent assessment of its estate with a view to reducing its business rates, which were last determined in 2017. The assessment identified a potential saving if new valuations were used. However, the service hasn't yet agreed new business rates, and it is unclear how the service intends to progress this in the future.

We found that the service doesn't review other estate costs, for example energy and water rates. No information on how much is being used is collected or reported to managers or the fire and rescue authority. And it doesn't monitor fleet costs, such as fuel use.

In important areas, such as procurement, the service is making little progress in achieving greater efficiencies through performance contracts. The service hasn't adequately reviewed whether the Telford fire station redevelopment was appropriately planned and had an effective procurement process. Disappointingly, the internal audit commissioned by the service didn't consider areas such as the procurement and tendering processes. Therefore, it isn't identifying lessons that can be learned for future construction projects.

Although the service is taking part in an NFCC [benchmarking](#) project, we found limited evidence that the service compares its costs and services with other organisations. With non-employee costs increasing from £4.45 million in 2022/23 to an anticipated £9.14 million in 2024/25, benchmarking would help the service make sure it is getting value for money in its procurement processes.

But it does use procurement frameworks where possible to improve its purchasing power. For example, the service purchased its latest fire engines through an existing framework.

Reductions in debt costs from changes to the capital programme account for 58 percent of the £571,000 non-pay efficiency savings either made or identified within the service's efficiency and productivity plan from 2022/23 to 2024/25.

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

Requires improvement

Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement 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.

Areas for improvement

The service should have a clear internal structure with appropriate governance arrangements to make sure the selection, design and delivery of projects are well managed, represent value for money and provide the intended outcomes.

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

The service should make sure it has the right skills and capacity to successfully manage change across the organisation.

The service should make sure its estates management programmes are linked to its [community risk management plan](#), and that it understands the impact future changes to those programmes may have on its service to 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 understands its future financial challenges

The service has an understanding of future financial challenges. A balanced revenue budget has been set for 2024/25. It anticipates an end of year surplus, which will be transferred to its reserves.

The underpinning assumptions are relatively robust, realistic and prudent. They take account of the wider external environment and include some scenario planning for future spending reductions. The service has carried out a sensitivity analysis, which has helped it to consider the implications of different levels of funding and spending pressures, such as pay awards, on its financial forecast.

The service has identified few opportunities to make savings or generate further income. The efficiency review carried out ahead of setting the 2024/25 revenue budget identified comparatively small efficiency savings of £210,000 considering reductions in debt costs are part of this total. The service has also identified £1.6 million allocated as capital expenditure that may not be required and could reduce future debt charges. However, we were told by the service that CRMP planning work hasn't been completed, so no decisions have been made.

Internal governance of projects needs to improve

The service's strategic planning and oversight of the Telford fire station redevelopment has been poor, with a lack of adequate monitoring and reporting on this major construction project. There have been factors outside the service's control, such as supply chain problems and inflationary cost increases in construction materials. But this doesn't fully account for the anticipated 60 percent increase above the original budget.

The project, which was originally to be funded largely from reserves, will now require significant additional borrowing. It brings into question the value for money of the scheme.

Ineffective internal governance means the service has failed to recognise and review significant risks.

The service needs to put in place a clear internal structure with appropriate governance arrangements to make sure projects are well managed, represent value for money and provide the intended outcomes.

ICT systems aren't helping to sustain and improve organisational performance

During our 2021 inspection, we highlighted as an area for improvement that: “The service needs to assure itself that it is making the most of opportunities to improve workforce productivity and develop future capacity through its use of innovation, including the use of technology.” The service has made limited progress. It remains an area for improvement.

There is a lack of planning to support productivity. We found that ICT provision is a continuing problem. Issues were identified with:

- data quality;
- the growing number of IT systems due for replacement, including the incident recording system, learning platform and service website;
- limited resources to meet the demand for innovation from service departments, such as removing the paper-based processes for safe and well visits;
- replacement pagers to alert on-call firefighters;
- mobile data terminals mounted on fire engines; and
- faults with the command and control system.

The service doesn't have the capability and capacity to manage future change

The service has limited capacity and capability to bring about sustainable change. We found various sections are stretched and have restricted levels of resources to innovate and improve service provision. These include areas such as HR, finance, procurement, health and safety, and ICT. They are small teams, but the service can and does bring in external support when required.

Another area in which the service lacks capacity and capability to achieve effective change is project management. We found that projects are often assigned to staff as an addition to their existing role. We were told there is a lack of training and support for staff managing projects. An imbalance in the allocation of work is leading in some cases to staff welfare issues. And there is ineffective oversight and scrutiny of projects through the service programme board, or the systems governance group for ICT projects.

There is a lack of clarity about the use of the service's reserves

The service's plan for using its reserves is unclear. We reviewed the proposed funding arrangements for the Telford fire station redevelopment that were submitted to different committees of the fire and rescue authority. We found conflicting information was provided in the various statements on funding, the use of reserves and borrowing.

The service should make sure that it provides clear information, so fire and rescue authority members are appropriately informed about funding arrangements and future budget implications.

Reserves have historically been high but are now set to fall to low levels. The service will have to carefully consider the use of its reserves in the future.

The service's estates strategy isn't effectively linked to its CRMP

The service's estate strategy doesn't have clear links to the CRMP.

The current CRMP for 2021–25 states that astute financial management and mid-term financial plan development make sure the service has capacity to deliver priorities. It also states that the service “continues to make affordable and sustainable capital investments, such as the development of Telford Fire Station and Training Centre”.

Our inspection has identified that the Telford training facilities are of a very poor standard and are deteriorating. Staff told us that running repairs are needed to keep the buildings functional. The service has missed an opportunity to improve its training facilities by not including this in the Telford fire station redevelopment.

We were told that as part of the planning for the next CRMP, the service is consulting on the need for an additional fire station in Shrewsbury, known as Shrewsbury North. This would provide another operating base in the town on the other side of the River Severn. It would help the service to respond promptly in the local area when the river has flooded and bridges are inaccessible. However, we found a disconnect between CRMP development and estates planning. The operational need for the station has been considered, but no work has been carried out to assess its financial feasibility. It is unclear why the service is consulting on such a significant project if it hasn't allocated the funding or understood the budget implications beforehand.

The service's fleet strategy isn't actively improving efficiency and effectiveness

Our inspection identified that the service has a good understanding of the current condition of its fleet vehicles. We were told about a digital system that is helping to support maintenance and repair scheduling.

However, we found that the service's fleet strategy (2018–25) hasn't been updated since its publication and there is limited connection with the CRMP. The strategy includes a series of actions required to improve and maintain the fleet and make sure it matches the service's needs. These include a series of seven reviews, such as on pumping appliances, rescue response and working at height. There were limited updates on the status of these reviews and how they are improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the service's fleet.

The service doesn't actively exploit opportunities to generate income

Income generation isn't a priority for the service. In 2022/23, the service didn't generate any other income. We were told that the service doesn't rule out examining opportunities that present themselves, but they aren't something it is actively pursuing.

Promoting the right values and culture

Requires improvement

Shropshire 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. 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 senior managers are visible and demonstrate the service's values through their behaviours.

The service should make sure staff have access to services to support both their mental and physical health.

The service should proactively monitor working hours (including overtime) to improve staff well-being.

The service should assure itself that its arrangements for managing health and safety are effective.

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

Main findings

The service's values aren't routinely demonstrated by all staff

At the time of our inspection, the chief fire officer and an assistant chief fire officer were away from the workplace on sickness absence. They were both subject to a misconduct investigation following allegations of inappropriate WhatsApp messages about female colleagues that appeared in the media on 23 April 2024.

Clearly these events have affected the service and continue to cause a high degree of uncertainty. Staff are at varying levels of acceptance, with some shocked by the allegations. We found that staff are positive about the discussions and the support for their well-being the service is now providing.

We found that most staff we spoke to demonstrated the service's values and were committed to the organisation, and many felt that the negative media attention didn't accurately represent the service.

However, the service has more to do to establish a positive workplace culture where its staff routinely demonstrate behaviour that is consistent with its values. Some behaviours we were told about clearly didn't meet the standards expected, and there wasn't a strong culture of challenge. We were disappointed to hear of instances of poor culture on some shifts, as well as misogyny and bullying.

The service has put in place a confidential reporting line called Say So, but we found that staff aren't confident to use it. The service needs to do more to promote an environment where all staff feel confident that they can raise inappropriate behaviour and that their concerns will be appropriately considered.

In our last inspection in 2021, we highlighted that the service had developed a new clearly defined set of values in its workplace charter that incorporates the [Core Code of Ethics](#). In this inspection we identified that momentum following the charter's implementation had stalled and it wasn't being championed in the service. We spoke to some managers who didn't see the value and importance of the Core Code of Ethics. And they were dismissive of the service's online information package on values and culture.

The service should do more to make sure that it improves staff awareness of its values at all levels. And it should consider how to do this so it improves staff understanding and makes sure they recognise the importance of its values.

We recognise that the executive leadership team members will have many challenges as part of their new roles. Values and culture should be a key focus of their collective efforts to improve the service. We look forward to reviewing how this work has been prioritised.

Senior leaders are visible, but they don't always act as positive role models

Many staff told us that before the allegations about the chief fire officer and assistant chief fire officer, the service was improving in terms of leadership and communication. They said leaders were visible, and there was change towards more openness and transparency.

However, we heard that senior leaders didn't always act as positive role models or demonstrate the culture and behaviours of the service. Following the accusations of inappropriate WhatsApp messages, staff feel let down by senior managers. We also heard about poor practices, with managers not creating a supportive and inclusive environment, and failing to challenge inappropriate behaviour.

In the staff survey carried out for this inspection, 47 percent (53 out of 113) of respondents disagreed that senior leaders consistently model and maintain the service's values. This was almost half of the respondents. It is a large increase from the inspection survey we carried out in 2021, when 14 percent (20 out of 145) disagreed senior leaders model service values.

The service needs to improve staff access to mental and physical health support

The service has some well-being provision to support the mental and physical health of staff. This includes mental health first-aiders and videos produced for a Time to Talk Day. There is suicide awareness training and fitness sessions, such as yoga, running and circuit training. We also found that staff regularly discuss their well-being with their manager. In our survey, 73 percent of respondents (88 out of 121) told us they discuss their personal well-being and/or work-related stress with their manager at least quarterly.

But it was evident that access to support services for the mental and physical health of some staff was ineffective. Several staff told us about delays and inconsistencies in the service's occupational health provision. We were informed that the recent allegations reported in the media resulted in an increased demand for welfare support. Staff told us this further exposed the limitations of the occupational health provider, with the service having to access support from neighbouring services.

The service's approach to health and safety is ineffective

The service has health and safety policies in place, and respondents to our survey told us that they understood procedures to help them work safely. But our inspection identified weaknesses in health and safety provision. Staff told us that the service gave health and safety training low priority. For example, new support staff joining the service don't receive any of this training, and the quality of the training provided to the rest of the workforce could be improved. It isn't accredited, and we were told that course content was crammed into a one-day course.

We found that the quality of accident investigations is inconsistent, with insufficient training likely to be an underlying cause. This lack of consistency may limit the service's potential to prevent similar incidents in the future.

We also found ineffective arrangements around risk assessments. These included limited measures to reduce the effects of contaminants following attendance at fire incidents or from training with real fire.

The service still doesn't monitor working hours effectively

During our 2021 inspection, we highlighted as an area for improvement that the service should take early action to monitor hours (including overtime) to improve staff well-being. During this inspection, we were disappointed with the lack of progress. This remains an area for improvement.

The service doesn't actively monitor staff who have secondary employment or dual contracts to make sure they comply with service policy and don't work excessive hours. Nobody is responsible for monitoring the number of hours staff work. We understood that this could be done within the rota system, but that it wasn't a priority for the service or managers.

Our data shows that there has been an increase in the numbers of wholetime firefighters who have external secondary employment. As of 31 March 2023, 31.4 percent of wholetime firefighters had external secondary employment. This is an increase compared to the previous year. As of 31 March 2022, the figure was 24.3 percent.

Absence management procedures have improved

In our 2021 inspection, we identified that the service should make sure that it had effective absence/attendance procedures in place. We were pleased to find that the service has put in place measures to address this. The area for improvement has been closed.

We found there are clear processes in place to manage absences for all staff. There is clear guidance for managers, who are confident in using the process. Most staff we interviewed thought that the service managed absences well and in accordance with policy. We spoke to managers who told us a return-to-work welfare discussion took place, and absences and trends were monitored by senior leaders. The service has also introduced an HR specialist who has taken responsibility for absence management. This greater oversight helps the service to put in place additional support to staff, such as mental health awareness training.

Getting the right people with the right skills

Requires improvement

Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement 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 CRMPs. 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.

Areas for improvement

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

The service should review its succession planning to make sure that it has effective arrangements in place to manage staff turnover while continuing to provide its core service to the public.

The service should assure itself that all staff receive the right training 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.

Main findings

Workforce planning is ineffective

The service does some workforce planning, but it doesn't take full account of the skills and capabilities it needs to effectively carry out its CRMP. We found limited evidence that the service's planning allows it to fully consider workforce skills, and overcome any gaps in capability. For example, we found that the workforce plan is a static document with limited monitoring or performance measures to review its effectiveness. The plan isn't linked to a current analysis of skills gaps in the service. And there is no service training strategy with links to the workforce plan.

The service's use of national funding to provide Level 3 Diploma in Fire Safety training, granted after the Grenfell tragedy, was ineffectively planned and not clearly linked to its training needs. We were also told about a series of training reviews carried out over several years without any meaningful outcomes.

The service needs to do more to consider its future needs and succession planning. There are key roles that are crucial to the service functioning where there is no evident succession plan. We were given examples of staff providing ample notice of their intention to retire to allow a suitable handover period to take place. But the service didn't act quickly enough due to stretched resources and is consequently being reactive in such situations. We were also told about difficulties filling some positions in the service such as ICT technicians, and training and driving instructor roles.

Operational training is managed well, but not all staff are appropriately trained for their roles

During our 2021 inspection, we highlighted as an area for improvement that: "The service should assure itself that control staff are appropriately trained for their role." We were pleased to see that the service had put in place a series of measures to satisfactorily address this. Improvements include establishing a [watch](#) manager training post, and a range of training packages have been developed and are now in use. This area for improvement has been closed.

Most staff told us that they could access the training they needed to be effective in their operational role. The service's training plans make sure it can maintain operational competence and capability. For example, the records we reviewed showed that all staff had up-to-date breathing apparatus assessments. Incident commanders receive regular training and assessment of their skills, knowledge and understanding. However, many members of staff expressed concern about the deteriorating nature of the service's operational training facilities and the future impact this may have on maintaining core competencies.

We also found that staff don't receive the full range of training to help them fulfil their role. We found that operational staff have limited training on the partial or total evacuation of buildings, and some haven't received appropriate training on prevention or how to carry out an SSRI visit. In addition, we identified that there is no plan for initial and refresher training for non-operational staff on topics such as equality, diversity and inclusion, the Core Code of Ethics and the service's values, and health and safety. Training is carried out, but it isn't done regularly, and it is difficult for the service to manage and co-ordinate staff training needs.

The service promotes learning and improvement

The service promotes a culture of continuing professional development throughout the organisation, and it encourages staff to learn and develop. For example, the service has an education and training fund available so staff can ask for financial support to aid their self-development.

We were pleased to see that the service has a range of resources in place. These include operational bulletins, training notes and training packages on the service's online learning system.

Most staff told us they can access a range of learning and development resources. Of staff who responded to our survey, 88 percent (107 out of 121) agreed that they have received sufficient training to effectively do their job. And 86 percent of respondents (104 out of 121) agreed that they can access the right learning and development opportunities when they need to. This allows them to do their job effectively.

Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity

Requires improvement

Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement 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.

Areas for improvement

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

The service should identify and overcome barriers to equal opportunity, so its workforce better represents its community, including making sure staff understand the value of [positive action](#) and having a diverse workforce.

The service should make sure it has robust processes in place to carry out [equality impact assessments](#), and review its policies and procedures to make sure those staff with a [protected characteristic](#) aren't disproportionately affected.

The service should improve the way it collects equality data so it can better understand its workforce's demographics and needs.

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

Main findings

The service needs to improve its approach to seeking and acting on staff feedback and challenge

More work is needed to build trust and confidence between senior leaders and the workforce by improving the way the service seeks challenge, gathers feedback from all staff and responds to staff concerns.

The service has developed several ways to work with staff on issues and decisions that affect them. These include measures to build awareness of fairness and diversity throughout the workforce, as well as targeted initiatives to identify matters that affect different groups. For example, following media reports of the allegations relating to senior officers, the service carried out health and well-being workshops with staff to allow them to share their feelings and opinions in a safe space. We are interested to see how the service will act on this feedback.

However, many of the staff we spoke to told us they have limited confidence in the service's feedback processes and don't think they are effective. Most staff we spoke to felt confident in providing feedback but felt strongly that they wouldn't be listened to by senior managers. We also heard concerns from staff about a lack of support when reporting inappropriate behaviour, and a lack of trust that confidentiality would be maintained.

Seeking feedback and challenge from staff and effectively acting on this feedback will be a critical element for the new principal officer team as it tries to steady and develop the organisation. Response rates to its internal staff survey have been progressively declining, from 64 percent in 2020 to 37 percent in 2024. This indicates staff don't believe views will be acted on.

The service should review how effective it is in tackling bullying, harassment and discrimination

The service should improve staff understanding of bullying, harassment and discrimination, including their duty to eliminate them. In our staff survey, 16 percent of staff (19 out of 121) told us they had been subject to bullying or harassment, and 17 percent (21 out of 121) reported experiencing discrimination in the last 12 months.

The results are large increases on our survey findings in 2021, when 3 percent of staff (5 out of 153) told us they had been subject to bullying or harassment and 7 percent (11 out of 153) reported experiencing discrimination over the past 12 months.

In this inspection, we found that the service has clear policies and procedures in place. It has dismissed people when their behaviour has been found to be contrary

to the service's values. However, we also found that staff have limited confidence in how well the service can deal effectively with cases of bullying, harassment and discrimination, as well as grievances and discipline.

Throughout the course of our inspection, we identified that staff at all levels were failing to have difficult conversations with colleagues about performance or behaviours. Staff described the service to us as close-knit, but this might prevent action being taken that could stop future bullying, harassment and discrimination.

We found that staff don't always raise workforce problems because they have limited confidence in the service's processes. Some staff don't feel these processes support the individual making the complaint and feel the service will try to suppress the issue.

We were also told about concerns among staff about the time taken to investigate and the impact on those involved. We identified several grievance cases that went on for periods of longer than 12 months.

The service needs to do more to improve the diversity of its workforce

The service needs to do more to make sure its recruitment processes are fair and accessible to applicants from a range of backgrounds. Operational posts at the level of station manager and above are extensively advertised through forums such as the NFCC, [Women in the Fire Service UK](#) and the [Asian Fire Service Association](#). Taster sessions are held to support firefighter recruitment. However, there is limited positive action in other recruitment processes and a lack of analysis to support improvement.

Recruitment campaigns at all levels aren't directed at, or accessible to, under-represented groups. And the service isn't taking steps to improve diversity. We examined several recruitment campaigns where data on applicants' protected characteristics weren't in the files. We saw that recruitment processes were reviewed. However, we found that there was no evaluation to support positive action recruitment, and limited evidence that learning had been identified to improve future recruitment.

There has been little progress to improve ethnic and gender diversity. None of the 53 new starters in 2022/23 identified as being from an ethnic minority background. We also heard that the recent recruitment of wholetime firefighters was rushed and not well planned. This limited the service's ability to take robust positive action to make sure there was a diverse range of candidates. We were told that this resulted in only one recruit who identified as a woman out of six new recruits. A further 2 applicants who identified as a woman, out of 12 applicants, are being held in a pool for future selection.

As of 31 March 2023, 3.3 percent of wholetime firefighters and 2 percent of on-call firefighters identified as being from an ethnic minority background. And 2.8 percent of the whole workforce identified as being from an ethnic minority background, which is much lower than the local population of 10 percent.

As of 31 March 2023, 8.1 percent of wholetime firefighters and 9.1 percent of on-call firefighters identified as a woman. And 18.6 percent of the service's workforce identified as a woman, compared to an average of 19.4 percent throughout all fire and rescue services in England.

In our 2021 inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should improve the way it collects equality data so it can better understand its workforce's demographics and needs. In 2020/21 the service held no ethnicity data for 23.6 percent of its staff. Disappointingly, as of 31 March 2023, this figure had risen to 25.3 percent of the workforce, compared to an overall England rate of 9.5 percent. This remains an area for improvement.

The service needs to improve its approach to equality, diversity and inclusion

The service has an equality, diversity and inclusion plan for 2021–25, which describes its strategy for being “purposefully inclusive and diverse”. A steering group is responsible for overseeing and directing work to achieve the strategy's aims. We found the group has taken action to support well-being and reasonable adjustments, and consider uniform issues. There has been communication to staff and events covering topics including menopause, Pride and women in the fire and rescue service, as well as some inter-faith events.

However, we found that the service needs to do more to improve its approach to equality, diversity and inclusion. Training on equality, diversity and inclusion isn't robust, although there are some areas of good work, such as on neurodivergence. Not all staff are completing refresher training, which is carried out irregularly. Many staff we spoke to dislike its online format. They said training would be far more beneficial face-to-face where lived experiences could be discussed. We recognise the logistical difficulties involved in giving training in-person. We were also told that the training was generic and could be improved to cover specific roles, for example prevention and protection staff and senior leaders.

The service doesn't have effective processes in place to carry out equality impact assessments (EQIAs). Its EQIA brigade order was last reviewed in July 2009, despite stating that it will be reviewed every two years. Staff told us that it was a continual challenge to demonstrate the value of EQIAs to colleagues. As we identified in our last inspection, the service has many existing policies and procedures that don't have EQIAs in place and we can't see any action or plan to address this. It means the service isn't fulfilling its duty to make sure that its policies and procedures don't discriminate against anyone and promote equality of opportunity.

In our last inspection in 2021 we positively commented on the introduction of the staff Voices group. In this inspection, we found that there has been limited progress in realising the group's potential for raising awareness and actively contributing to improvements in equality, diversity and inclusion.

Managing performance and developing leaders

Requires improvement

Shropshire 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.

The service should make sure its processes for the selection, development and promotion of staff are open and fair, and it should do more to make sure staff have confidence in promotion and selection processes.

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.

Main findings

The service's performance development review system isn't working

In our 2021 inspection, we highlighted as an area for improvement that the service should improve all-staff understanding and application of the performance development review process. During this inspection, we were disappointed to find that the service continues to have an inconsistent process in place for performance and development. This remains an area for improvement.

Most staff told us that they feel performance development reviews hold limited value and are a tick-box exercise. Many questioned why they are done online without any face-to-face interaction with the line manager. They said the performance development reviews are too complex and should be driven by the needs of the individual, not the service. They described the process as useful for people seeking promotion but said it doesn't cater for other staff. We heard that the process has been simplified slightly for on-call staff, but that it is still too comprehensive and could be improved.

Staff don't have confidence in the promotion process

The service needs to do more to make sure its promotion and progression processes are fair. We spoke to many operational staff who were frustrated and didn't have confidence in the process. In our staff survey, 55 percent of respondents (67 out of 121) disagreed that the promotion process in the service was fair. This is a large increase from our inspection in 2021, when 31 percent (47 out of 153) disagreed that the process was fair.

In this inspection, we found a widespread perception of nepotism, and many staff felt let down by the system. We heard about managers interviewing friends and not declaring this as a conflict of interest. Staff told us that who was going to get the job was routinely known and circulated unofficially before the promotion process had taken place.

We were told about managers failing to have difficult conversations with staff who they deemed unsuitable for promotion. Troublingly, we also heard several allegations of inappropriate interference with promotion processes. The service should assure itself that it has an open and fair process to select staff for leadership roles.

We were told that panel members involved in the promotion or recruitment process had to do [unconscious bias](#) training to help mitigate discrimination. But when we reviewed training records for these staff, we found that many hadn't attended the training or had completed it a long time ago. This may account for inconsistencies in the process.

The service was carrying out a review of this process, and we will be interested to see the results of this work.

The service should aim to make its pool of future leaders more diverse

The service needs to encourage applicants from diverse backgrounds into middle- and senior-level positions. In recent years, it has tended to fill most positions internally without advertising externally.

At the time of our inspection, the fire and rescue authority and the service announced it had recruited three senior leaders externally as interim replacements for the principal officers who were absent. Two of them identified as a woman.

The service is one of seven in England that has adopted the NFCC's direct entry scheme. This is intended to help the service to recruit from a wider pool of candidates with a broader set of backgrounds, skills and experiences. However, it was disappointing to note that in June 2023 the direct entry scheme for station managers was unsuccessful in recruiting a suitable applicant.

The service needs to do more to develop leadership and high-potential staff at all levels

In both our 2018 and 2021 inspections, we highlighted as an area for improvement that the service should put in place an open and fair process to identify, develop and support high-potential staff and aspiring leaders. Disappointingly, very little has been done. This remains an area for improvement.

The service needs to improve the way it actively manages the career pathways of staff, including those with specialist skills. It should consider putting in place more formal arrangements to identify and support members of staff to become senior leaders. There is a significant gap in its succession planning.

The service had done a gap analysis to effectively implement the Fire Standards Board's standards on [leading the service](#) and [leading and developing people](#). We look forward to seeing how this develops in future.

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