

Fire & Rescue Service 2021/22

Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service



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About this inspection

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

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

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

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

What inspection judgments mean

Our categories of graded judgment are:

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

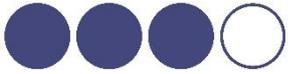
Good is our expected graded judgment for all fire and rescue services. It is based on policy, practice or performance that meet pre-defined grading criteria, which are informed by any relevant [national operational guidance](#) or standards.

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

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

If we find serious critical failings of policy, practice or performance of the fire and rescue service, we will judge it as inadequate.

Overview

Question	This inspection	2018/19
 Effectiveness	 Requires improvement	Requires improvement
Understanding fires and other risks	 Requires improvement	Requires improvement
Preventing fires and other risks	 Requires improvement	Requires improvement
Protecting the public through fire regulation	 Good	Requires improvement
Responding to fires and other emergencies	 Requires improvement	Requires improvement
Responding to major and multi-agency incidents	 Good	Good

Question	This inspection	2018/19
 Efficiency	 Requires improvement	Requires improvement
Making best use of resources	 Requires improvement	Requires improvement
Future affordability	 Requires improvement	Requires improvement

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

HMI summary

I am very grateful to the staff at Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service who worked diligently with us on this inspection. I want to thank the service for working with us by accommodating the virtual approach of this inspection. Inspections usually take a hybrid approach, but inspecting during the pandemic meant everyone had to adapt. I also want to recognise the disruption caused by the pandemic. This has been considered in our findings.

The service has made significant improvements since our last inspection in 2019. It has made progress against most of the areas for improvement we found two years ago, especially in protecting the public through fire regulation. In this category, I was pleased to see the service has moved from requiring improvement to good. But the service has made poor progress in improving its prevention work through quality assurance and evaluation.

We were impressed that the service proactively engages with local businesses and other organisations to promote understanding of and compliance with legislation. It uses different platforms to raise awareness of current themes and to offer support and advice. We look forward to seeing how successful the new website for the service is, and how the service evaluates its use.

The service has got better at protecting the public. But it still needs to improve several areas of its effectiveness. For example, by doing more to engage with its communities to understand risks, and to broaden its approach to risk. Risk information needs to be consistently gathered and recorded and kept up to date and relevant.

The service will reap huge benefits, and create a more representative workforce, by doing more to access new talent and different ways of thinking. There are still several barriers to open and fair recruitment that need to be overcome. The service should, for example, direct recruitment campaigns at under-represented groups and treat on-call and [wholetime staff](#) equally for operational roles.

In 2020, still only 0.8 percent of its firefighters have a black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) background and only 7.7 percent of firefighters are women. This latter figure is slightly higher than the England average of 7.0 percent but, in real terms, wholetime women firefighter numbers have stayed the same for the past five years.

There are lots of positives in the service's financial management, which is generally good. The service now has more funding than when we inspected last. This is positive. We saw improved resourcing of the service's prevention, protection and response functions. [Reserves](#) are well used and we are pleased with how well the service manages its fleets and estates. But the link between the [integrated risk management plan \(IRMP\)](#) and the fleet and estates strategies isn't clear enough.

The service can, however, show how allocating staff to prevention, protection and response reflects the risks and priorities identified in the Year 5 update for the IRMP.

The service has also developed a sound understanding of future financial challenges, but it needs to work on protecting itself against foreseeable risks.

The service collaborates with the county council and other fire and rescue services but would benefit from being more ambitious in this area. It still needs to improve its plans and exercising for business continuity.

There are some new areas for improvement in its response to incidents. It needs to better inform the public about ongoing incidents and improve its debriefing system.

I saw positive improvements in culture and in the behaviours of staff and crews. But the service needs to do more work on this, alongside developing its leaders and managers better. The negative effects of this can be seen throughout the service. And the service still isn't managing working hours effectively. We are concerned that arrangements for managing rest periods between [on-call](#) and wholetime commitments aren't suitable or adequate. The service needs to address this issue as a priority.

While the improvements we saw during this inspection aren't enough for a significant grade improvement, we look forward to seeing the improvements the service has already made being replicated in other areas.



Andy Cooke

HM Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Service in numbers



Response

Northumberland

England

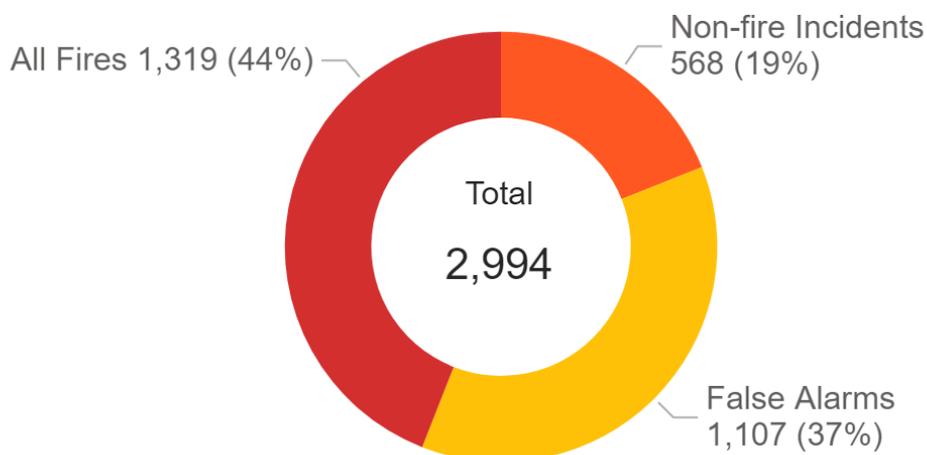
Incidents attended per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2021	9.25	9.16
Home fire safety checks carried out by fire and rescue service per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2021	2.81	4.47
Fire safety audits per 100 known premises Year ending 31 March 2020	4.69	2.55
Average availability of pumps Year ending 31 March 2020	87.73%	83.07%



Cost

Firefighter cost per person per year Year ending 31 March 2020	£29.97	£23.82
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Incidents attended in the year to 31 March 2021

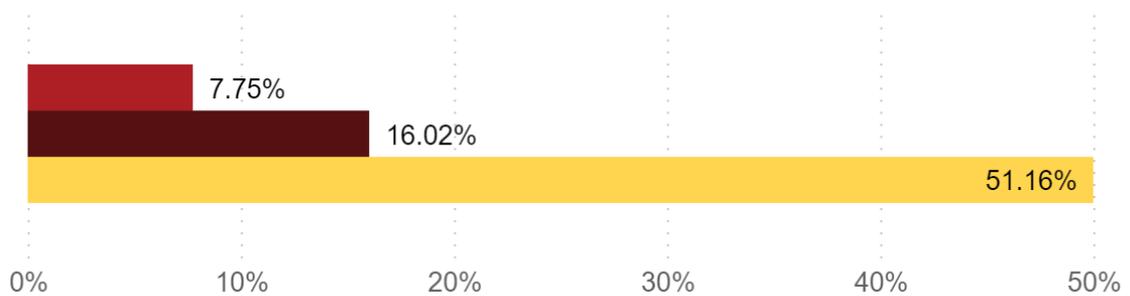




Five-year change in total workforce 2015 to 2020	-14.68%	-5.30%
Number of firefighters per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2020	0.90	0.63
Percentage of firefighters who are wholetime Year ending 31 March 2020	46.53%	65.10%

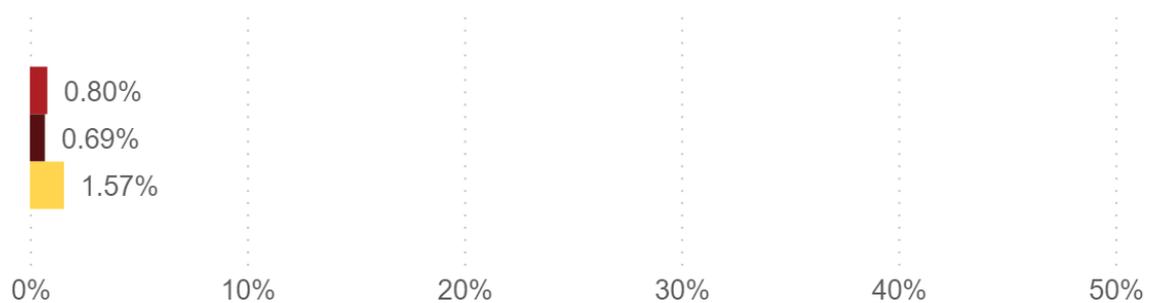
Percentage population, firefighters and workforce who are female as at 31 March 2020

Female ● Firefighters ● Workforce ● Local population



Percentage of population, firefighters, and workforce who are Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) as at 31 March 2020

BAME ● Firefighters ● Workforce ● Local population



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

Effectiveness



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



Requires improvement

Summary

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

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service has improved its effectiveness since our inspection in 2019. It has made progress against most of the areas for improvement that we found. And we saw improvements in the way it protects the public.

The service is working from an IRMP that has been extended by a year. It will have a new plan from 2022. We saw some good use of data to create risk profiles. But the service has not engaged with its communities as well as it should to understand risks. So, its approach to risk is too narrow.

There are some new areas for improvement in its response to incidents. It needs to better inform the public about ongoing incidents. And it should improve its debriefing system.

The service has made poor progress in improving its prevention work through quality assurance and evaluation.

Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies



Requires improvement (2019: Requires improvement)

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at understanding risk.

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

Areas for improvement

- The service should make sure it gathers and records relevant and up-to-date risk information to help protect firefighters, the public and property during an emergency.
- The service should make sure that the aims and objectives of prevention, protection and response activity are clearly outlined in its IRMP.
- The service needs to improve how it engages with its local community to build a comprehensive profile of risk in its service area.

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

The service needs more direct engagement with the community

The service hasn't fully assessed the risks it faces as part of its [integrated risk management planning](#) process. When assessing risk, it has focused on limited information from internal and external sources. This doesn't enable it to build a comprehensive risk profile. For example, the service told us that engagement with the public is difficult, so it relies on information from partner organisations and data from operational incidents.

Consultation for the current IRMP is now dated, with plans for consultation for the new IRMP for 2022 still in draft. The service needs to ensure consultation includes direct engagement to both understand the risk and explain how it intends to mitigate it. It should engage the local community and others, such as the police, local health authority, business networks and the charity sector.

The IRMP needs updating

The service's IRMP has been extended for a fifth year. It has made a Year 5 update that is a one-year extension to the Fire and Rescue Plan (IRMP) for 2017-21.

The original plan is detailed, and explains how prevention, protection and response will reduce risks to the community. But it is no longer aligned to the service's current strategies for prevention, business fire safety and response.

The plan was extended because of the pandemic. The service also wanted to give newly appointed officers time to develop the plan. These reasons are not without merit. The decision to extend the existing IRMP was agreed by the county council. But the service should have had more developed plans in place, to avoid extending the existing IRMP for a fifth year.

Gathering, maintaining and sharing risk information needs to improve

The service collects some risk information about the people, places and threats it has identified as being the highest risk. But the information we reviewed was limited, inaccurate or not up to date. We found risk information on premises was out of date for nearly one quarter of all high-risk sites.

We also heard from staff during our inspection that training and quality assurance of risk information is not consistent.

We did find evidence of sharing risk information across departments, although the process for doing this was inconsistent. We found the process for sharing information on short-term risks to be unreliable. It uses word-of-mouth and station briefings to update crews.

The service needs to do more to ensure it gathers and records risk information to a consistent standard, including information on short-term risks. It should do more to keep risk information up to date and relevant.

While the service has made some progress on gathering risk information, the area for improvement identified in 2019 remains.

Good understanding of risk from operational activity

The service is good at using feedback from local and national operational activity to challenge its planning assumptions. The service uses a third party to analyse operational risk activity from fires and road traffic collisions. So it can identify those most at risk from these types of incidents.

It uses this information in its station plans. The information also helps it to prioritise prevention activity and to identify areas of the community at greatest risk from fire.

The service also uses information from its operational debrief process and [national operational learning](#) from fire and rescue services, as well as joint organisational learning from other blue light services.

The service has reviewed building risks following the Grenfell Tower inquiry

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

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service has responded to this tragedy. The service has assessed each at-risk building in its area. This includes all buildings at risk because of height, the type of construction or cladding. At the time of inspection, the service had visited 314 out of the 317 identified premises.

It has done a fire safety audit and collected and passed relevant risk information to its prevention, protection and response teams about buildings identified as high-risk.

Preventing fires and other risks



Requires improvement (2019: Requires improvement)

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at preventing fires and other risks.

Fire and rescue services must promote fire safety, including giving fire safety advice. To identify people at greatest risk from fire, services should work closely with other organisations in the public and voluntary sector, as well as with the police and ambulance services. They should provide 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 works.
- The service should make sure it quality assures its prevention activity, so staff carry out safe and well visits to an appropriate standard.
- The service should improve its use of communications to provide fire prevention information and to promote community service.

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

Service's prevention strategy is clear and easy to understand

The service's prevention strategy is clearly linked to the risks identified in the Year 5 update to the IRMP.

Prevention work doesn't take place in isolation. Appropriate information is sent to other relevant teams across the service. It is used to adjust planning assumptions and direct activity between the service's prevention, protection and response functions.

For example, the service uses both the community safety department and operational crews to respond to requests from the public and partners for prevention work. Any risks identified are shared with other departments.

COVID-19 has had a negative impact on prevention work

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

During inspection, data provided by the service showed that 745 home safety checks had been completed between April 2020 and January 2021.

By comparison, the service carried out an average of 7,924 home safety checks in the three financial years before the pandemic.

The service has needed to take a risk-based approach during the pandemic. But it must assure itself that it identifies and visits high-risk residents. This is in line with the latest guidance.

Targeting of most at risk is limited

The service provides a limited home safety check. For example, it is only just developing its [home fire safety checks](#) into full [safe and well visits](#). We found limited improvement in this area since our last inspection.

The service does have a risk-based approach to direct prevention activity towards sections of the community. But the range of risk factors is narrow. So the service may miss some people who are at an increased risk of fire and other emergencies. For example, we were told the main routes for referrals were from adult social services and a company that provides oxygen to home-users.

Station plans for directing fire prevention activities are also based on risk information. Operational crews are carrying out what is effectively a campaign of targeted cold-calling.

The service needs to assure itself that prevention activities are directed from all available risk information. This would improve targeting of those most at risk.

Operational staff aren't confident about safe and well checks

Staff told us they don't have the right skills or confidence to carry out safe and well visits. These checks don't always cover an appropriate range of hazards that can put [vulnerable people](#) at greater risk from emergencies other than fire. Operational staff told us that training for safe and well visits was often informal. Staff, who may or may not be competent with safe and well methodology, train their colleagues.

The service needs to make sure staff are properly trained to do safe and well visits and understand the value of these visits.

Staff are confident about identifying safeguarding concerns

Staff we interviewed told us about occasions when they had identified [safeguarding](#) problems. They told us they feel confident to act appropriately and promptly. We heard from staff across all roles that they were confident in identifying vulnerable young persons and adults. They showed they knew how to request support. Formal training in this area was limited to an e-learning package. But staff reported confidence in this area because they had support from experienced colleagues and simple procedures to follow.

The service works well with partner organisations

The service works with a range of partner organisations such as:

- the youth offending team;
- local education department;
- the Prince's Trust; and
- adult and young persons' services in Northumberland County Council.

We found good evidence that the service routinely refers people at greatest risk to other organisations that may be better able to meet their needs. These organisations include the county council's adult and young persons' services. The service can take referrals from adult social services. It acts appropriately on the referrals it receives. For example, during 2020/21, the service received 553 requests for support through the [multi-agency safeguarding hub](#). The service recorded a 99 percent response rate.

It works well with adult services to exchange information about adults at greatest risk. It uses the information to challenge planning assumptions and target prevention activity. For example, it identified that people over the age of 65 living alone in flats are at greatest risk of a fire, or suffer more severe consequences of a fire.

The service is good at supporting young people

The service has a range of suitable and effective interventions to target and educate people of different ages who show signs of fire-setting behaviour. This includes the Extinguish Programme, a fire cadet scheme, and the Prince's Trust programme.

The Extinguish Programme is aimed at young persons who have shown signs of interest in fire-setting. The other schemes are for young people who may benefit from positive role models and the opportunity to improve social and wellbeing skills.

When appropriate, the service routinely shares information with other partner organisations to support the prosecution of arsonists. The service works closely with Northumbria Police to investigate the cause of fires thought to be deliberate. The service uses specially trained staff for this.

Evaluation of prevention activities still requires improvement

In our Round 1 inspections, we identified as an area for improvement the way the service evaluates the effectiveness of its prevention activities. In this inspection, we found limited evidence that the service does this.

Reassuringly, the service's prevention strategy has identified as a priority for 2021/22 a review and further development of quality assurance for all community safety work. The service's own improvement plan showed that in June 2021 it was working to achieve this. It still has more to do to achieve its own objectives.

Community engagement and communication is limited

During the inspection, we heard how the service has increased its use of social media to deliver community safety messages. We understand that social media will play an important role in its plans to communicate and engage with the community.

But the service's use of other means of community engagement is limited. And its evaluation of methods used is also limited. So we still consider this an area for improvement, as identified in our 2019 inspection.

The service needs to assure itself that its chosen methods of communication and engagement are the most appropriate for getting to the most hard-to-reach in the community.

Protecting the public through fire regulation



Good (2019: Requires improvement)

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

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

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

Clear strategy for fire protection and business fire safety

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

Staff throughout the service are involved in fire protection and business fire safety, with information effectively exchanged as needed. For example, we saw where protection staff identified problems with a [dry riser](#). They shared this with operational crews, as well as operational staff, highlighting fire safety concerns. This resulted in the serving of a prohibition notice.

Through the service's fire safety database, staff in all roles can record and share information on premises to build an accurate and up-to-date risk profile. In turn, this information and data is used to adjust planning assumptions and direct activity between the service's protection, prevention and response functions. This means resources are properly aligned to risk.

COVID-19 impact on protection

We considered how the service had adapted its protection activity during our COVID-19-specific inspection in October 2020. At that time, we found it was slow to suitably adapt its protection work for the public. From the start of the pandemic, the service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it would normally. It decided to stop face-to-face fire safety audits and enforcement activity while risk assessments and national guidance were developed to protect staff.

Since then, the service has fully adopted national guidance and is now back on schedule to carry out fire safety audits in line with its RBIP.

Good alignment of activity to risk

The service's RBIP is focused on the service's highest risk buildings. It uses a combination of national data sources and guidance to determine what is a high-risk premises.

The service has adopted an approach to its RBIP programme that is consistent with national guidance.

The audits we reviewed were completed within prescribed timescales. These were realistic and proportionate.

But the service doesn't have a prescribed timescale for responding to fire safety complaints from the public. Having said that, the cases we looked at were within a reasonable timescale. We would expect timescales for responding to fire safety complaints from the public to be clear and accessible to staff and public alike. We would also expect timescales to have a clear rationale, based on risk.

Similarly, we noted the service did not have a clear policy for fire safety audits of premises following a fire. Although we saw evidence that the service was doing post-incident fire safety audits, the approach was not consistent. The service should assure itself that it has a clear, stated position for post-incident fire safety audits. And it should assure itself that it does them in a consistent manner.

Proportionate response to doing post-Grenfell building checks

The county of Northumberland has no premises that fall within the scope of the post-Grenfell Building Risk Review Programme. But the service did identify premises it considered at risk. This might be due to the building's height or method of construction; or the type of cladding.

At the time of inspection, the service had carried out inspections at 314 out of 317 premises identified as potentially high risk. Information gathered during these audits is made available to response teams and control operators so they can respond more effectively in an emergency.

The service is on track to visit all the high-risk buildings it has identified in its service area by the end of 2021.

Good quality of audits

We reviewed audits of different premises across the service. This included audits as part of the service's RBIP, after fires at premises where fire safety legislation applied, where enforcement action had been taken, and at high-risk buildings.

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

Proportionate approach to quality assurance

The service assures the quality of protection activity in a proportionate way. We found the process was applied with a sensible and risk-based approach.

The service has good evaluation tools to measure the effectiveness of its activity and to make sure all sections of its communities get appropriate access to the protection services that meet their needs.

Active and consistent approach to enforcement

The service consistently uses its full range of enforcement powers. When appropriate, it prosecutes those who fail to comply with fire safety regulations. The service told us it prefers a collaborative approach with businesses, to gain compliance. But our inspection found a growing confidence in using statutory powers, such as prosecution of those businesses committing the most serious fire safety offences or continuously ignoring regulations. We saw evidence of seven prohibition notices and two enforcement notices being issued within the last 12 months. And we saw details of two prosecutions that were under consideration.

In the year to 31 March 2020, the service issued no alteration notices, no enforcement notices and four prohibition notices, and undertook no prosecutions. It completed one prosecution in the five years from 2016 to 2020.

Resourcing continues to improve

The service has increased the number of dedicated protection staff to meet the requirements of its RBIP. But some team members were not fully qualified at the time of inspection. When all staff are fully trained, the service will be able to provide the audits and enforcement activity needed, both now and in the future.

The service uses station-based staff to carry out lower-risk audits. In addition, the service was in the process of appointing up to 11 fire safety advocates from across all roles and duty types. When these additional staff are in place, the service anticipates that it can do an extra 500-plus audits of lower-risk premises each year.

Staff are trained in line with national standards by a range of accredited external providers.

The service works closely with other enforcement bodies

The service works closely with other enforcement agencies to regulate fire safety, and routinely exchanges risk information with them. The business fire safety team is located in the same building as the council's other services for regulatory enforcement. These include building control, licensing and trading standards.

We heard from both the service and others how these arrangements allow for good sharing of information and ideas. And they support a consistent approach to enforcement.

Good response to building and licensing consultations

The service responds to all building and licensing consultations on time. So it consistently meets its statutory responsibility to comment on fire safety arrangements for new and altered buildings. For the year ending 2020/21, the service responded to all building regulations and licensing consultations within 15 days, on 99 percent of occasions.

Good improvements in engaging with business

The service proactively engages with local businesses and other organisations to promote understanding and compliance with fire safety legislation. Following on from developments started during the pandemic, we have seen the service improve its use of social media to engage with the business community. The service uses a range of platforms to raise awareness of current themes. It also offers support and advice through these outlets.

During the inspection, we were shown the content that will soon be available to businesses through a new and dedicated website. We look forward to seeing how successful this is and how the service evaluates the use of this service.

Good at managing unwanted calls from automatic fire alarms

The service has an effective risk-based approach to manage the number of unwanted fire signals from automatic fire alarms. It has adopted a staged approach to reducing the number of these calls.

During inspection, we were shown how the service reduced its initial attendance at some problematic premises. It has raised invoices to recover costs for attendance at sites unable or unwilling to reduce calls from unwanted fire alarms.

As a result of the staged approach, the service receives fewer calls from automatic fire alarms. The service has seen a reduction from 1,254 calls in 2017/18, to 728 in 2020/21.

Fewer unwanted calls mean that fire engines are available to respond to a genuine incident. It also reduces the risk to the public because there are fewer fire engines travelling at high speed on the road.

Responding to fires and other emergencies



Requires improvement (2019: Requires improvement)

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement 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 within their areas.

Areas for improvement

- During incidents, the service should ensure it gives relevant information to the public to help keep them safe.
- The service should ensure an effective system of debriefing to enable staff to learn from operational incidents is proportionate and targeted, to improve future response and command.

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

Good response strategy

The service's response strategy is linked to the risks identified in its IRMP. Its fire engines and response staff, as well as its working patterns, are designed and located so it can respond flexibly to fires and other emergencies with the appropriate resources.

For example, during 2020/21, the service reviewed pre-determined attendances against all incident types to ensure the right number of fire engines were attending incidents at the time of call. The service has also completed a service specification for fire engines and for the next generation of breathing apparatus equipment. This has now gone out to tender.

The service has been piloting a more flexible response with five of its on-call fire engines. This aims to improve availability and response times. Following successful trials, the service is increasing the range of incidents that these fire engines can safely attend with a reduced crew.

Service response standards are not being met

There are no national response standards against which the service can [benchmark](#) its performance for the public. But it has set out its own response standards in its IRMP.

The response standards set by the service require the first fire engine to attend a fire within 10 minutes and to attend a road traffic collision within 15 minutes. The service has also set standards for the second fire engine to arrive at a fire within 13 minutes and at a road traffic collision within 20 minutes. In all cases, the service aims to achieve these standards on 80 percent of all occasions.

The service doesn't always meet these standards. Home Office data shows that, in the year to 31 March 2020, the service's average time to [primary fires](#) was 11 minutes and 40 seconds, which is slower than the average time of 10 minutes and 27 seconds for predominantly rural services. The service told us they intend to review response standards when developing the new IRMP.

Further analysis of these times shows the service compares favourably when looking at the call handling times and the time taken by crews to initially respond. This suggests the overall response time is due to the predominantly rural nature of the service and the travel distances involved.

The service needs to improve on-call availability

To support its response strategy, the service aims to have 91 percent of its fire engines (21 out of 23) available on 100 percent of occasions.

The service doesn't always meet this standard. For the year ending 2020/21, it achieved an overall availability of 88.8 percent. But further analysis shows that, while wholtime fire engines were available 91.5 percent of the time, on-call fire engines achieved only 87.7 percent availability.

Good improvements to incident command skills

The service has trained incident commanders who are assessed regularly and appropriately. Since our last inspection, the service has now trained and assessed incident commanders in line with national standards and operational guidance. This enables the service to safely, assertively and effectively manage incidents, ranging from the small and routine to the complex and multi-agency.

As part of our inspection, we interviewed incident commanders from across the service. The incident commanders we interviewed are 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 \(JESIP\)](#).

The service does need to ensure that arrangements for continuous professional development and maintenance of competence are as effective as the arrangements for formal training and assessment.

During inspection, we heard how the incident command support pack was a useful resource for managing incidents. But we repeatedly heard how the unit used to support the management of the most complex and protracted incidents was often unavailable. This is because of staffing issues. The service needs to review arrangements for ensuring there are suitable facilities for incident commanders and command support teams for the safe and effective management of incidents.

Training and inclusion of control room staff needs to improve

We were disappointed to find that the service's control staff aren't always included in the service's command, training, exercise, debrief and assurance activity. We found that control staff have a limited role in training and exercises. Control isn't tested to the same extent as operational crews and incident commanders.

We understand that measures to protect staff from COVID-19 may have increased the isolation of staff in control. But they should be involved more in the planning, provision and debriefing of operational training and exercises.

Limited actions in response to Grenfell recommendations

The service hasn't reviewed its ability to provide fire survival guidance to many callers simultaneously, as we would have expected it to. This was identified as learning for fire services after the Grenfell Tower fire.

We heard how Northumberland doesn't have any buildings that meet the accepted definition of high rise. But the service has arrangements to accept calls in its control room from Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service, which does have high-rise buildings. Also, the current staffing model has two staff on a night shift. So there is a risk of receiving more calls than can be easily handled.

Plans for training control staff in handling multiple fire survival guidance calls were put on hold at the start of the pandemic. This training had not taken place at the time of inspection.

The service has developed a Grenfell Action Plan that outlines actions and decisions made against all the recommendations from Phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower inquiry. It has recorded against a number of recommendations that it is awaiting national guidance, or that the recommendation applies only to incidents involving high-rise buildings.

We feel the service should be more proactive in using the lessons from Grenfell to consider its operational arrangements. It should implement interim, local actions quicker. The service questioned the relevance of the Grenfell recommendations to its own area. But it should be more challenging and ambitious when considering these recommendations.

Risk information needs further improvement to keep up to date

We sampled risk information from sites that the service considers to be high risk. These include a major hospital and a national [heritage site](#). Information included what is in place for firefighters responding to incidents at high-risk buildings, and what information is held by [fire control](#).

We found varying levels of detail, with some very good examples. But we saw examples where information was not up to date. We found examples of local risk information that had not been updated since 2015. We heard that risk information is now easier to access and understand than it was last time we inspected. But the unreliability of [mobile data terminals](#) causes frustration.

Gathering up-to-date risk information remains an area for improvement for the service, despite some progress from our 2019 inspection.

Improved evaluation of operational performance

We were pleased to see evidence of improvement in how the service follows its policies to assure itself that staff command incidents are in line with operational guidance.

The service updates internal risk information as a result of information received. For example, we saw evidence that the service updated operational guidance notes for the requesting of an aerial appliance. And we saw an operational bulletin about new pumps.

The service exchanges this information with other interested partner organisations where relevant. One example was that it gave information to another fire and rescue service on the use of appropriate protective equipment during a water-related incident.

The service has responded to learning from incidents to improve its service to the public. For example, it recommended the local authority improve warning signs at a ford where cars were becoming stuck during floods.

Operational learning needs to be better understood and evaluated

During inspection, we found improvements to how staff receive and record operational learning. But very few staff could tell us the details of any recent operational learning outcomes. This suggested the sharing and recording of learning had become a tick-box exercise.

This remains an area for improvement from 2019. The service needs to assure itself that it communicates operational learning effectively. And it needs to assure itself that operational learning is fully understood by operational staff.

The public needs to be better informed of incidents

The service doesn't have good systems in place to inform the public about ongoing incidents. This would help keep people safe during and after incidents. The service limits most of its messaging to major incidents and incidents that affect the public. It doesn't yet have a live feed of operational incidents the public can access.

It has made some improvements to the use of social media and it plans to improve its website. But this remains an area for improvement from our inspection in 2019.

Responding to major and multi-agency incidents



Good (2019: Good)

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

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

Areas for improvement

- The service should ensure its firefighters have good access to relevant and up-to-date risk information. This should include cross-border risk information.
- The service should make sure it participates in a programme of cross-border exercises, with learning from them captured and shared.
- 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 well tested.

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

Preparedness for major and multi-agency incidents

The service has effectively anticipated and considered reasonably foreseeable risks and threats it may face.

These risks are listed in both local and national risk registers as part of its integrated risk management planning. For example, the community risk register for Northumbria (that includes the areas covered by Northumberland, and Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue services) includes details of plans for:

- flooding;
- pandemic influenza;
- industrial accidents;
- adverse weather; and
- hazardous transport.

The service is familiar with the significant risks that neighbouring fire and rescue services could face and that it might reasonably be asked to respond to. These include Newcastle Airport and other risks in Tyne and Wear. The service has good arrangements to share up-to-date risk information and plans for these.

Ability to respond to major and multi-agency incidents

We reviewed the arrangements the service has in place to respond to different major incidents, including major flooding and wildfires.

The service has a good understanding of national support arrangements for major incidents. These are well understood by staff. For example, they had a good understanding of how to request national assets for large, complex and protracted incidents, where local resources could become exhausted or simply unavailable.

More required to prepare for marauding terrorist attacks

We found plans for responding to a marauding terrorist attack (MTA) are not fully understood by operational staff. They are most likely to be first in attendance at this type of incident. For example, we heard staff had received limited training for MTAs. They were not fully briefed on updates to local procedures in light of recent changes in national guidance.

Good at working with other fire services

The service supports other fire and rescue services responding to emergency incidents. For example, the service shares a border with four other services, across three different regions. During our inspection, we heard from staff at fire stations who work across all these borders. They all reported that arrangements were good. The service is intraoperable with these services and can form part of a multi-agency response.

Cross-border risk information needs improving

We were told that the service shares a [mobilising](#) system with Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service. So it has full access to all Tyne and Wear's risk information. And the service has agreements to receive updates for risk information with the three other cross-border services, for up to 10 kilometres.

From the examples we inspected, we found the cross-border information with Tyne and Wear was comprehensive and in date. But the examples we looked at for other services were dated, with one site being uploaded in 2008 and others being more than five years old, with no apparent review or update.

Providing good access to relevant and up-to-date risk information for cross-border risks remains an area for improvement from our inspection in 2019.

Cross-border exercising needs implementing

The service has a cross-border exercise plan with neighbouring fire and rescue services. These plans should enable the services to work more effectively together to keep the public safe. But the plan was all but stopped due to COVID-19.

We understand how COVID-19 has hit all services but the service could have achieved more in this area. There are alternative methods to keep crews briefed and prepared, such as desktop exercises and walking through site-specific scenario plans.

The service is already starting its new cross-border exercise plan and we look forward to seeing how this progresses.

Good understanding of JESIP

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

This includes the application of JESIP principles, and the use of a decision-making model shared across all other blue light services and the local authority.

Good working with other partner organisations

The service has good arrangements to respond to emergencies with other members of the Northumbria [Local Resilience Forum](#) (LRF). These arrangements include the use of strategic and tactical co-ordinating groups, as well as sub-groups to support a local response.

The service is a valued partner and active member of the strategic and tactical co-ordinating groups. The deputy chief fire officer chairs the emergency services liaison group. The service is a member of the communications, social care, and training and exercising groups. The service also took on the difficult task of leading the excess deaths logistics group during the pandemic.

The service takes part in regular training events with other members of the LRF. It facilitated the debrief of a public health exercise to test arrangements for COVID-19 surge testing. The service is also involved in the testing and exercising of plans for a wood processing plant, the only risk within Northumberland that comes

under the regulations for the control of major and hazardous sites. So it has met its statutory duty.

National learning

The service keeps itself up to date with national operational learning updates from other fire services and [joint organisational learning](#) from other blue light partners, such as the police service and ambulance trusts. This learning is used to inform planning assumptions that have been made with other partners.

Efficiency



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



Requires improvement

Summary

An efficient fire and rescue service will manage its budget and use its resources properly and appropriately. It will align its resources to the risks and priorities identified in its IRMP. It should try to achieve value for money and keep costs down without compromising public safety. It should make the best possible use of its resources to achieve better outcomes for the public. Plans should be based on robust and realistic assumptions about income and costs. Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service's overall efficiency requires improvement.

We found Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service to be making positive changes. But it has made limited progress against some of the recommendations from our 2019 inspection.

Its financial management is generally good. It has made good use of its [reserves](#). We saw improved resourcing to the service's prevention, protection and response functions. But support services are still stretched.

The service collaborates with the county council and other fire and rescue services. It could be more ambitious in this area. It still needs to improve its plans for business continuity and for exercising.

We were pleased with how well it manages its fleet and estates. But the link between the IRMP and the individual strategies for fleet and estates are not explicit. The service has only limited funding and ambition for generating income.

Making best use of resources



Requires improvement (2019: Requires improvement)

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at making best use of its resources.

Fire and rescue services should manage their resources properly and appropriately, aligning those resources to meet the services' risks and statutory responsibilities. They should make best possible use of their resources to achieve better outcomes for the public.

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service's statement of assurance for 2019/20 reported a net revenue budget of £15,320,740. This is a 9.2 percent increase from the previous financial year.

Areas for improvement

- The service should make sure there is a testing programme for its business continuity plans, particularly in high-risk areas of service.
- The service should have effective measures in place to assure itself that its workforce is productive and that their time is used as efficiently and effectively as possible to meet the priorities in the IRMP.
- The service should actively seek collaboration opportunities with other emergency services, and beyond, to achieve value for money and better outcomes 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.

Improved financial planning

We were encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since the last inspection. The service's financial plans are not being linked to the specific risks identified in the IRMP. But it can show how the allocation of staff to prevention, protection and response reflects the risks and priorities identified in the Year 5 update to the IRMP.

Plans are built on sound scenario planning. They help make sure the service is sustainable. And they are underpinned by financial controls that reduce the risk of misusing public money.

There are close and effective financial arrangements with the county council. The service finance manager is part of the county council's finance team and participates in the service's management team. This helps ensure sound oversight of the spending and revenue for the service's functions. We were informed from a range of sources that the fire and rescue service budget is now funded at a level that allows

it to meet local risks. The service is no longer subject to previous savings targets that were unachievable and unsustainable.

Productivity remains a challenge in areas of working

In our 2019 inspection, we identified that the service was not monitoring working hours well enough. It has got better at this, but it is still not managing working hours effectively.

The service is taking steps to make sure the workforce's time is as productive as possible. This includes a new policy and performance framework. A strategic policy, risk and performance officer, a newly created post, oversees this to scrutinise and improve performance.

During the inspection, it was clear that staff in support roles are working to capacity. But the service's current arrangements for managing productivity haven't yet identified strategic priorities for support functions. These priorities would allow support staff to work as effectively as possible. We heard from support staff who would benefit from a review of workloads and priorities. This would help them to direct their efforts in the right areas.

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated changes to working practices that are being implemented as business as usual. These include the increased use of flexible working arrangements and improved use of communications to reduce travel and costs.

Collaboration could be broader and more ambitious

The service needs to consider collaboration and evaluate the collaborations that it is involved in. Most of the collaboration we saw related to joint working through the council. This included the sharing of fire stations for council functions, as well as with Northumbria Police and North East Ambulance Service. We also heard of shared estate to support the local mountain rescue team. This benefits the community.

Other notable collaboration projects include the joint procurement of uniforms with County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service; and fleet maintenance with Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service. Collaboration generates some savings, but we think more could be achieved if the service looked further afield.

Overall, the service needs to improve how it monitors, reviews and evaluates the benefits and outcomes of collaborative activity. It could use this to learn and inform decisions.

Continuity arrangements need reviewing

The service needs to go on improving its continuity arrangements, as identified in our 2019 inspection.

For example, the business continuity arrangements for control have not been exercised, because of COVID-19 restrictions.

In June 2020, the service's own improvement action plan highlighted that there was no timeframe for completing plans to review all business continuity arrangements.

Continuity arrangements need to be regularly reviewed and tested to ensure staff are fully aware of the arrangements and their associated responsibilities.

Sound financial management of fleet and estates

We were encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since the last inspection.

There are regular reviews to consider all the service's expenditure, including its non-pay costs, and challenge makes sure the service gets value for money. We consider that the service is taking good steps to ensure its fleet and estate provision is relevant to the future needs of the service.

For example, by reviewing its fleet profile and extending the life of some vehicles, the service has identified savings of £780,000. The service also competitively tests its fleet spending and [benchmarks](#) itself against national statistics from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy and best value performance indicators. The service has also identified net savings of £60,000 by reviewing its private finance initiative contracts for Pegswood and West Hartford fire stations.

Savings and efficiencies made have had no disproportionate impact on operational performance and the service to the public.

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



Requires improvement (2019: Requires improvement)

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at making itself 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 should invest in better services for the public.

Areas for improvement

- The service should make sure that its fleet and estates management programmes are linked to the IRMP, and that it understands the impact future changes to those programmes may have on its service to the public.
- The service needs to assure itself that it is maximising opportunities to improve workforce productivity and develop future capacity through innovation, including use of technology.

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

Improving value for money

We are encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since the last inspection. The service has developed a sound understanding of future financial challenges. It plans to mitigate its main or significant financial risks. For example, the service has worked with the county council to secure reserve funding to help meet future requirements. And it has agreed levels of savings that ensure an appropriate budget for the immediate future.

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

- the reduced savings target from £960,000 to £100,000;
- the impact of COVID-19; and
- recommendations from Phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower inquiry, where funding has been secured to allow for growth in fire protection.

We have also seen the service consider costs for the firefighter pension detriment settlement, and funding reserved for the national emergency services mobile communications project (ESMCP).

We noted the service is taking steps to harness innovation in the use of green technologies. It has fitted solar panels at two fire stations, with plans for four more sites. The service has also invested in ground-source heat pumps at eight fire stations, to reduce running costs and carbon footprint.

Good management of reserves

We are encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since the last inspection. The service has a sensible and sustainable plan for using its reserves. This plan includes:

- £250,000 reserves for the firefighter pension detriment settlement;
- £206,000 reserves for ESMCP; and
- grants received to support the recommendations made from Phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower inquiry.

The service does not hold reserves that are not earmarked as it has access to council reserves for unforeseen events. Current reserves are approximately 3 percent of the service's total budget.

Strategies for fleet and estates need to be linked to the IRMP

We are encouraged to see good management and oversight for fleet and estates. Our inspection identified a clear understanding of current and future requirements for management of costs, including contracts and suppliers. For fleet management, this was through fire service staff, who showed a thorough understanding of costs and supply networks.

The county council oversees management of costs for estates. It includes fire stations in the council estates strategy.

But the service needs to ensure that its strategies for both estate and fleet align with the IRMP. This will ensure it can exploit opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness now and in the future.

Transformation can be improved

The service is considering how changes in technology and future innovation can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of its workforce.

The service, with the council, is shifting to greater use of digital technologies in its communications and IT infrastructure. The service should set out its ambitions for innovation and development in the use of digital data and technology. It should work more closely with the council to progress this.

The service has earmarked funding for ESMCP. But we were told the service decided against introducing multi-agency incident transfer, based on cost, even though other emergency services in the region already have this facility and it is a recommendation from Phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower inquiry.

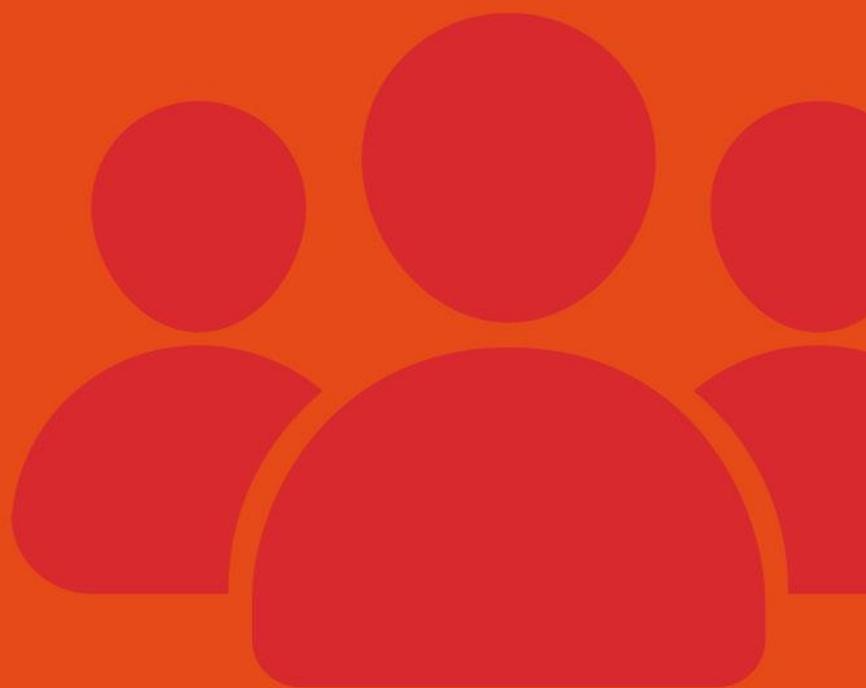
The service has limited capacity and capability to bring about sustainable future change. But it can, through its work with the council and other blue light services, improve efficiency. The service needs to set out its ambition and define the benefits it seeks to achieve.

Income generation

The service normally generates income from its training activities. But the COVID-19 pandemic meant there was very little activity in 2019-21. The service also receives income by taking emergency calls for the county council outside normal working hours. And it receives some private funding to support community safety events.

The June 2021 improvement action plan shows that the service is considering income generation through a wider county council trading arm. We didn't see details of this.

People



How well does the service look after its people?



Requires improvement

Summary

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

We were pleased to see the service has recently made changes to improve its culture. We look forward to seeing the full benefit of these once they are established.

The service has got better at ensuring it has the right people with the right skills. But it still has work to do in this area.

It needs to keep improving its understanding of equality and diversity. And it needs to do more to engage its staff. It also has work to do in developing leaders and managing talent.

Overall, the service is moving in the right direction to improve how it looks after its people.

Promoting the right values and culture



Requires improvement (2019: Requires improvement)

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

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

Causes of concern

The management of dual contracts, for staff working [on-call](#) and [wholetime](#) in the service, must be improved.

Recommendations

By 31 March 2022, the service should:

- review its current arrangements for managing the working time of staff who are both on-call and wholetime;
- make sure that arrangements for staff working on dual contracts meet statutory requirements for health, safety, welfare and wellbeing; and
- make sure staff take appropriate breaks between on-call and wholetime commitments for personal welfare and appliance availability.

Areas for improvement

- The service should make sure all staff understand and demonstrate the service values.
- The service should assure itself that arrangements for maintenance of competence for managers who carry out health and safety risk assessments are effective.

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

The service needs to continue to improve culture and behaviours

The values of the service are those of the county council.

During inspection, we found a good understanding of these values. Our staff survey reflected this: 98 percent of staff stated they were aware of them.

Our staff survey also showed that 85 percent of staff believe they are treated with dignity at work. It showed that 90 percent of staff believed line managers consistently modelled service values. These results were consistent with most of what we heard from staff during our inspection.

We were consistently told that there had been improvements in culture within the past 12 months. But most staff believed further improvements were needed and expected.

Staff also told us that some senior managers had not always acted as role models for service values. This was also reflected in our staff survey, with 22 percent stating senior leaders did not consistently model service values.

It was clear from our inspection that the service has identified culture and behaviours as a priority. We saw good evidence of efforts to improve in these areas. These improvements are set out in the new people strategy.

The service needs to continue to improve its culture and the behaviours of leaders and managers, as we originally found in our inspection in 2019.

Good provision for mental and physical wellbeing

The service continues to have effective wellbeing policies and practices for staff. There is a significant range of wellbeing support for both physical and mental health. For example, staff have access to occupational health services through a county council contract with the NHS.

Most staff had a good understanding and confidence in the wellbeing support available. They shared with us positive experiences of support.

But some staff had limited appreciation of the clinical-based approach now adopted by occupational health. The service could do more to help the workforce understand this approach to health and wellbeing.

Positive health and safety engagement

The service continues to have effective and well-understood health and safety policies and procedures. The service told us that in the previous quarter it had reported 3 accidents and 11 [near misses](#). We took this as evidence of a positive reporting culture.

The service data return for 2019/20 shows the service had only one workplace injury that was reportable under the regulations for reporting of injuries, diseases and dangerous occurrences.

Health, safety and welfare policies and procedures are readily available and effectively promoted to all staff. Both the Fire Brigades Union and the Fire Officers' Association reported that the service manages the health and safety of staff well. And it usually consults and engages with them on health and safety problems, and risk assessments. Both staff and representative bodies have confidence in the health and safety approach taken by the service.

During the inspection, we were told that managers who carry out risk assessments are trained and qualified to the Managing Safely® award, accredited by the Institution of Safety and Health. We were also told that staff do not have to complete a three-year re-qualification of this award, as it is not a statutory requirement for showing maintenance of competence.

The service should assure itself that it has suitable and sufficient arrangements for maintaining the competence of staff who assess health and safety risks.

Positive absence management but record keeping needs to improve

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

We found clear processes to manage absences for all staff. There is clear guidance for managers, who were confident in the process. Absences are generally managed well and in accordance with policy. We found evidence that managers were supporting the return to work of staff absent due to ill health or injury. For example, they maintain contact with staff and take advice from occupational health.

But we also found that managers were not always recording the content of discussions. This makes it harder for the service to monitor and evaluate absence management.

Overall, the service has seen an increase in staff absences over the 12 months from 2019/20 (1,602 shifts lost) to 2020/21 (1,918 shifts lost). Of this, the service told us that 146 lost shifts (46 percent of the increase) were linked to COVID-19 related absences.

Management of staff with more than one contract

During inspection, we saw that 18 percent of wholetime staff have a dual contract for both wholetime and on-call. This is lower than the average of 24 percent for England. And 25 percent of wholetime staff have a secondary contract of employment outside the service.

Staff and line managers told us that it was not unusual for some staff with on-call and wholetime dual contracts to report for their wholetime duties late and/or tired because they had been deployed in their on-call capacity before their wholetime shift. This appeared to be particularly prevalent at the start of a day shift when staff had been on call the night before.

We are concerned that arrangements for managing rest periods between on-call and wholetime commitments are neither suitable nor sufficient. The service needs to address this issue as a priority.

Getting the right people with the right skills



Requires improvement (2019: Requires improvement)

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at getting the right people with the right skills.

Fire and rescue services should have workforce plans in place that are linked to their [integrated risk management plans](#), set out their current and future skills requirements, and address capability gaps. This should be supplemented by a culture of continuous improvement that includes appropriate learning and development across the service.

Areas for improvement

- The service should assure itself that control staff are appropriately trained for their role.
- The service should make sure its workforce plan takes full account of the necessary skills and capabilities to carry out the IRMP.

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

Workforce planning needs to improve

Since our last inspection, we have seen improvements to the recording, monitoring and delivery of risk-critical training. This is now a priority for the service.

The service does some workforce planning. But it is not clear how this takes full account of the skills and capabilities it needs to meet the needs of its IRMP. We found limited evidence that the service's planning allows it to fully consider workforce skills and overcome capability gaps. For example, the service's people strategy makes six commitments, including one to development and education. But there are no timescales for implementing these promises about work that should already be in place.

The service has identified itself that it must further improve its succession planning and how it considers future needs. The service has committed, within its own people strategy, to develop a service-wide succession planning and talent management framework. But it has not set a date for achieving this or measuring progress.

There is a system in place to review workforce capabilities. But it was unclear how this is linked to a training needs analysis to ensure the annual training planner aligns to the IRMP and is properly funded. For example, we heard how the service had no plans to train more on-call firefighters until February 2022, even though it has vacancies at stations.

For a service that is reliant on on-call firefighters, we were surprised to see how reactive it is to on-call training requirements. This training could be planned in advance.

Staff learning and development needs to improve

During inspection, we saw how the new people strategy aims to improve the service's approach to learning and development, and to create consistent standards. We also saw improvements to the training and recording of risk-critical skills. This includes those needed by incident commanders; breathing apparatus skills; and emergency response driving.

Current arrangements for learning and development lacked the standard of consistency and quality assurance of an established competency-based framework.

This was especially evident with staff in the control room. The service's own improvement action plan highlighted (as recently as June 2021) that plans to develop a competence framework need further attention.

Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity



Requires improvement (2019: Requires improvement)

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

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

Areas for improvement

- The service should assure itself that staff are confident using its feedback mechanisms, including the grievance process.
- The service should make sure it has robust processes in place to undertake equality impact assessments and review any actions agreed as a result.
- The service should identify and overcome barriers to equal opportunity, so that its workforce better represents its community. This includes making sure staff understand the value of positive action and having a diverse workforce.

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

More improvements to act on staff feedback and challenge

In our 2019 inspection report, we said that the service needed to improve mechanisms for staff to give feedback safely and confidently to managers and leaders. The service still needs to improve these mechanisms.

At the time of inspection, we heard from staff that the new staff forum, Fire away, was a welcome improvement. This is a sign that the service is moving in a positive direction with staff engagement.

But the forum is relatively new. The only evidence of its use that we saw was a single example about the use of name badges.

From what we observed, the service is making progress with staff engagement. But it needs more time to build staff confidence and show there has been real change.

Understanding of equality and diversity needs to improve

The service has a process for equality impact assessments. At the time of inspection, we saw that the process does not properly assess the impact on each of the protected characteristics. So the service does not have a good enough understanding of its impact on equality.

The service could better inform this activity by engaging more with both internal and external networks. Networks available through the county council include LGBTQ+, menopause, carers, and race equality.

All staff within Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service have access to county council staff support groups for people with protected characteristics. But at the time of inspection, there was no mechanism for the service to get feedback from these groups. So it might not have a perfect understanding of the issues being raised.

The service could do more to encourage staff to engage with these support groups. And it could do more to understand the issues being discussed and raised.

More needed to overcome barriers to improve the diversity of the workforce

The service needs to do more to increase staff diversity. And it needs to do more to ensure diversity and inclusion are well understood and established, as reported in our 2019 inspection.

Since 2017/18, no new joiners to the service self-declared as being from a BAME background. In the same period, 16.7 percent of new joiners declared themselves female.

For firefighter recruitment specifically, 10.3 percent of all new recruits were female and none were recorded from a BAME background.

In the whole service's workforce, 0.7 percent are recorded as BAME and 16 percent female. As of 2020, 0.8 percent of firefighters are recorded as BAME and 7.7 percent of all firefighters are female.

The service has a slightly higher proportion of female firefighters than the national average – 7.7 percent compared with an England average of 7.0 percent. But the actual number of wholetime female firefighters has not grown in real terms since 2015/16. It has fluctuated between 13 and 14.

Recruitment campaigns aren't sufficiently directed at, or accessible to, under-represented groups. The service isn't leading change in this area to increase the diversity of its workforce. We saw evidence that attempts to recruit women during a recent wholetime recruitment campaign were limited in scope and ambition. We understand measures to control the spread of COVID-19 meant positive action events needed to be modified. But we saw limited effort to target under-represented groups and campaigns did not challenge barriers to recruitment into the service.

Barriers to open and fair recruitment and promotion need to be challenged and overcome

Overall, our inspection found that most staff had trust and confidence in processes for recruitment and promotion, including some who had been unsuccessful. It was also good to see that two recent senior staff appointments were made from outside the service. This shows the promotion process is open.

Disappointingly, we saw the service doesn't ordinarily recruit on-call staff into wholetime roles above the role of firefighter. We cannot understand why it would exclude on-call staff from applying for operational roles at, or above, the level they are working at in their on-call capacity. This is an area of recruitment and promotion where we found part-time workers to be treated less favourably than wholetime workers. This position is also inefficient. It means that trained and qualified crew and [watch](#) managers must join wholetime as firefighters and repeat the development process through wholetime positions.

Tackling bullying, harassment and discrimination

The service could go further to improve staff understanding of bullying, harassment and discrimination, including their responsibilities for eliminating it. Through our staff survey, 11 percent of staff told us they had been subject to bullying or harassment, and 13 percent to discrimination, over the past 12 months. Of these staff, 50 percent thought their concerns had been properly dealt with, and 50 percent thought it was too early to tell.

The service has clear policies and procedures for this. But staff have limited confidence that the formal processes deal with it safely and effectively. Our staff survey showed the biggest reason people did not report bullying, harassment or discrimination was because they feared being labelled a troublemaker.

Data provided by the service shows that only two grievances were submitted over the last two years. Some staff told us that informal procedures were preferred to the formal grievance process. But we found that informal outcomes were not recorded, and some staff lacked confidence in formal procedures.

Both the Fire Brigades Union and Fire Officers' Association reported confidence in the formal grievance procedures. But the evidence shows they are not encouraging members to use this option.

The service needs to continue to educate staff and managers on bullying, harassment and discrimination. It needs to continue to build trust between staff and managers. Staff and managers also need a better understanding of formal ways to resolve grievances and to have trust and confidence in the grievance process.

Managing performance and developing leaders



Requires improvement (2019: Requires improvement)

Northumberland 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 high-potential staff and improving diversity in leadership roles.

Areas for improvement

- The service should put in place an open and fair process to identify, develop and support high-potential staff and aspiring leaders.
- The service should assure itself that staff in management roles are trained in relevant leadership and management skills.

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

Positive line management conversations but room to improve

The performance management system allows the service to address performance, learning and development, and wellbeing of all staff. Overall, we heard more positive than negative comments about arrangements for conversations between staff and line managers. Encouragingly, we heard positive feedback on the new form that is used. Some described it as more people-centred.

For example, our staff survey found that 86 percent of staff have had a conversation about personal development with their line manager in the past 12 months, of which 69 percent found useful. Our staff survey also shows that 87 percent of staff have had a useful conversation about their performance with their line manager in the past 12 months. And it showed 83 percent of staff have had a useful conversation about their wellbeing in the past 12 months.

We were told that, in response to staff engagement, on-call firefighters receive group appraisals, although individual appraisals remain available on request. We think the

service should do more to understand why on-call staff feel an individual appraisal is limited in value for them, rather than adopting a group appraisal as the preferred alternative.

More support required to develop future leaders

We are encouraged to see the service has actively opened a pathway for staff from a non-operational background to reach a senior position within the service. This makes the overall process more open and fair.

But the service needs to improve how it actively manages staff career pathways. This includes those with specialist skills and those for leadership roles.

The service has limited talent management schemes to develop leaders and high-potential staff. And these aren't managed in a structured way that is open to evaluation. For example, the only process we heard any detail on was the assessment process to identify staff for future promotion. We didn't see or hear how the assessment process identifies development needs and how these might be supported through a structured programme.

We heard how the service has access to mentoring schemes through the county council. But we saw no evidence of this being used to support staff development. Equally, we didn't see evidence of other development tools and processes, such as peer support groups, action learning sets or shadowing of staff in senior roles, to gain a wider and deeper understanding of the service.

The service should consider more formal arrangements to identify and support members of staff to become senior leaders.

Leadership and management training need to improve

We saw an inconsistent approach to training and development of managers once staff adopt managerial roles.

We were told supervisory managers have access to a level 3 qualification in leadership and management, and middle managers have access to a level 5 qualification. But it was clear during inspection that access and support for these qualifications was not consistent. It was also unclear if this training was mandatory or optional.

Overall, we consider the development of leadership and management skills is an area for improvement.

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