

Divisions Affected – All

CABINET

15 September 2026

Business Management and Monitoring Report (Fire and Rescue Service focus)

Report of Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —
 - a) **NOTE** the recommendations contained in the body of this report and to consider and agree its response to them
 - b) **AGREE** that, once Cabinet has responded, relevant officers will continue to provide each meeting of the Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee with a brief written update on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendations for 12 months, or until they are completed (if earlier).

REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND

2. In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, the Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee requires that, within two months of the consideration of this report, the Cabinet publish a response to this report and any recommendations.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

3. The Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report providing finance, performance and risk data with a focus on the Council's Fire and Rescue Service.
4. The Committee would like to thank Cllr Neil Fawcett, Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Resources, Cllr Dan Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Transformation, Ian Dyson, Director of Financial and Commercial Services, Rob MacDougall, Chief Fire Officer and Director of Community Safety, Kathy Wilcox, Head of Corporate Finance, for attending

the Committee and answering questions, and to Verity Royle, Planning and Reporting Manager for drafting the report.

SUMMARY

5. The Head of Corporate Finance introduced the report which brought together finance, performance and risk updates for Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue and Community Safety as part of the Committee's rolling updates.
6. The service reported a small overspend of £0.5m against a budget of £32.6m for 2025/26. This was driven by a £0.6m overspend in Fire and Rescue, partly offset by a £0.1m underspend in Trading Standards. Reserves of £3.4m were held at year end, largely earmarked for vehicles and equipment.
7. Performance across all measures was reported as strong, with indicators rated green and continued delivery against key priorities, including community safety, health and tackling inequality. Capital expenditure of £1.3m on fleet and equipment was also noted, funded primarily from service reserves.
8. For context, the Chief Fire Officer gave a presentation on performance and proposed changes to the service's delivery model. The Fire and Rescue Service cover model was intended to better align resources with demand, which was concentrated during the day and early evening. Fire engine availability did not currently align with the busiest periods, and response times had been increasing nationally and locally, making change necessary.
9. He reminded the Committee of the breadth of activity undertaken by the service, noting that during 2025/26 it had attended more than 6,000 incidents. These included nearly 1,500 fires, 140 flooding incidents, 83 animal rescues, more than 118 incidents assisting other agencies, almost 350 road traffic collisions and over 50 hazardous chemical incidents. Although there was no statutory duty to respond to flooding, the Council had taken the decision nearly two decades ago to provide that service and to fund it accordingly.
10. There remained a mismatch between demand and on-call fire engine availability, with daytime and early evening demand almost two and a half times higher than at night. The service required 15 fire engines for adequate countywide cover, with additional measures when availability fell below that level. Daytime availability often came close to this threshold, and bank holidays and school holidays created particular pressure, recently requiring significant overtime to maintain cover.
11. Changes proposed through the Fire and Rescue cover model were considered essential to create a more sustainable service and improve response times. Although overall performance remained strong in several areas, current response times were below target. The service aimed to reach 80% of incidents within 11 minutes and 95% within 14 minutes, but current performance was 70% and 84% respectively. Average response time was 9 minutes and 15 seconds and had steadily increased over four years.

Oxfordshire was also performing below comparable rural services, which was a concern.

12. In relation to the consultation on changes to the service's operating model, recommendations had been made not to close the three fire stations originally identified. Further work was instead being brought forward on the final design of shift pattern changes, intended to move more resources into daytime periods to meet demand and improve response times. Staff working groups involving the service and the Fire Brigades Union had begun that day, aiming to agree a new shift pattern over the coming months. The timescales suggested proposals coming to Cabinet in autumn 2026 and implementation in 2027.
13. The discussion held by the Committee was far-reaching, looking at issues such as the delivery schedule for Carterton Community Safety Centre and the plans for Rewley Road and Kidlington fire stations, the remit of the New Dimensions grant, overall funding adequacy, governance and finance issues relating to the potential (now realised) need for cross-county delivery of a fire service due to Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), the adequacy of monitoring and reporting of data, the readiness for the service to protect heritage assets, and the relationship with the Fire Brigades Union in light of the consultation on the new fire service operating model.
14. In total, the Committee makes five recommendations, which can broadly be categorised into, firstly, areas where further information and transparency are required, namely routine performance monitoring, firefighter recruitment and retention, and the potential costs arising from Local Government Reorganisation. And secondly, areas where it wishes to see changes in future planning and operational modelling, specifically in relation to heritage assets and early scrutiny engagement in the development of the next Community Risk Management Plan

RECOMMENDATIONS

Information and Transparency

15. The Committee welcomed the willingness of officers to provide additional information during the meeting, in particular the briefing to explain the rationale behind altering the Fire and Rescue Service operating model. However, it was notable that in the Cabinet's BMMR report, the performance of the Fire and Rescue Service was rated green on all measures. This data tells a very different story different to one where the service requires a fundamental change to its operating model. It is the view of the Committee that if such significant change is needed and current KPIs do not show that, then the KPIs are not providing a faithful reflection of the health of the service and need to be updated.
16. In terms of the precise details which need to be included, the Committee is content to defer to officers and Cabinet members, but it is of the view that the

Fire and Rescue Service's performance indicators within the BMMR should be updated – and therefore reported on routinely within future BMMR's - to provide a more accurate picture of the service's standing. Some suggested KPIs the Committee considers may be of value include average fire engine coverage, and average times to reach incidents vs comparators and previous years.

Recommendation 1: That the Cabinet ensures broader and more reflective routine reporting on Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service performance within the BMMR, including benchmarking against comparable services, resilience measures and key performance indicators.

17. A key determinant of fire engine availability is the availability of appropriately trained staff, both whole-time and on-call, to respond to incidents. Recruitment and retention are therefore central to the service's resilience and operational effectiveness. For its and the service's assurance, the Committee would like to be provided with greater information about current activity to support and improve firefighter availability, and reflections on their success. Whilst not a direction of the Committee, a suggestion may be to include this information within the forthcoming report to Place OSC and Cabinet on the amendments to the future operating model and an annex.

Recommendation 2: That the Cabinet provides further information to the Committee regarding firefighter recruitment and retention activity, including current challenges, recruitment initiatives and reflections on their success.

18. The Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service currently sits within Oxfordshire County Council. However, in view of central government's minded-to decision to restructure local government in Oxfordshire into three unitary authorities, including one covering West Berkshire, this will have to change. At the time of Committee, the minded-to decision had not been announced, meaning a far greater degree of uncertainty. Whilst there remain some uncertainties, for example, in relation to what plans for devolution will look like, the Committee is of the view that the broad financial implications can now be assessed with a reasonable degree of confidence, both for the Council, but also for successor Councils and their residents. It seeks that this information is provided.

Recommendation 3: That the Cabinet provides greater transparency regarding the anticipated financial implications of Local Government Reorganisation for Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service, including any additional costs that may arise for future authorities or residents.

Future Planning and Risk Modelling

19. The Committee also considered a number of issues relating to the future strategic direction of the service. In view of the number of nationally and internationally important heritage assets within the county, members were

reassured to hear that heritage assets already feature within risk management arrangements and that engagement is undertaken with the owners of significant heritage properties. However, precisely because of Oxfordshire's unique concentration of nationally and internationally significant heritage buildings, it is all the more important that the risk of irreversible damage is minimised. The Committee recognises the financial pressures facing the Council and the wider public sector, and that difficult trade-offs are therefore inevitable. Nevertheless, members would welcome greater visibility of how the protection of heritage assets is reflected within the service's strategic priorities, operational planning and response modelling. Doing so would provide greater assurance that heritage risks are being appropriately considered, enable members to understand the trade-offs being made within response modelling, and provide a clearer evidence base against which to assess whether the service's approach to protecting these assets remains adequate over time.

Recommendation 4: That the Cabinet ensures that future Fire and Rescue Service response modelling, risk assessments and performance reporting explicitly consider the protection of heritage assets, including the implications for response times and incident planning in relation to heritage buildings.

20. Making explicit and exploring the trade-offs implied within plans and procedures is one of the primary function of Scrutiny. Whether it is in Committee itself, or through a less formal means of consultation, members would like to have the opportunity to review and input into the next Community Risk Management Plan.

Recommendation 5: That the Cabinet provides the Committee with an opportunity to scrutinise and comment upon the next Community Risk Management Plan, or any successor strategic planning document, at an early stage of its development prior to finalisation.

FURTHER CONSIDERATION

21. The Committee is aware that the specific issues around the changes to the Fire and Rescue Service's operating model are due to be examined by the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee so does not plan to look at that again. However, as per recommendation 5, the Committee wishes to have involvement in the drafting of the Community Risk Management Plan.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

22. Under Part 6.2 (13) (a) of the Constitution Scrutiny has the following power: 'Once a Scrutiny Committee has completed its deliberations on any matter a formal report may be prepared on behalf of the Committee and when agreed by them the Proper Officer will normally refer it to the Cabinet for consideration.'

23. Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

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Annex: Pro-forma Response Template

Background papers: None

Other Documents: None

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September 2026