Fire & Rescue Service 2023–25

Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service

Contents

Changes to this round of inspection

We last inspected Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service in December 2021. And in July 2022, we published our inspection report with our findings on the service's effectiveness and efficiency and how well it looks after its people.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Overall summary

Our judgments

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

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

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

HMI summary

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

I am satisfied with some aspects of the performance of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service in keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks, but there are areas in which the service needs to improve.

The service knows it needs to review its current ways of working to make them more efficient. This ongoing work includes a review of its operational model, to reflect

changing risk and the difficulties more rural services face in recruiting and retaining on-call staff. It also includes ways the service can improve staff productivity, use new technologies and develop how it works with other organisations. The service has ambitious plans to provide this change programme.

We were pleased to see that the service has made some progress against some of the areas for improvement we identified in our last inspection. For example, it has worked hard to address the delays in staff being trained and assessed in wearing breathing apparatus, a risk-critical skill it needs in its workforce.

But we were disappointed to see that the service hasn't made all of the progress we expected since our last inspection. It still needs to address false alarms to make sure its workforce is as productive as it can be. And it hasn't implemented an effective system to track how lessons learned from incidents are applied to its work.

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

- The service continues to provide effective activity to keep people safe from fire and other risks through its prevention, protection and response work. It has a well-qualified and well-resourced protection team to carry out fire safety audits in high-risk commercial premises in Oxfordshire.

- The service actively manages the availability of its fire engines to make sure it can respond quickly to incidents. But this is becoming difficult due to its decreasing number of on-call firefighters, and the need to provide them with flexible working options. The service is carrying out a comprehensive community safety service review to help address this.

- There have been many changes in middle and senior leadership positions in the service, some of which have caused disruption. And there are many staff in temporary roles as a result. The direction of the service needs to be clearly communicated to staff and the communities of Oxford during this time of change.

- The impact of changes within the service has reduced its capacity to continue improving its culture of equality, diversity and inclusion. It was disappointing to hear that some staff have experienced bullying and harassment in work. The service needs to improve the understanding and use of equality impact assessments and review how effective its policies are at reducing unacceptable behaviour.

We recognise the service is currently going through significant changes, which are affecting some areas of work. We will keep in close contact with the service to monitor the effect of these changes.

Roy Wilsher
HM Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Service in numbers

Profile	Oxfordshire	England
Area Square miles	1,006	50,370
Population (thousands) 30 June 2022	738	57,106
Population density Thousands per square mile	0.7	1.1

Cost

Funding Year ending 31 March 2023		£2.5bn
Expenditure per population Year ending 31 March 2023	£52.11	£46.66

Response

Incidents attended per 1,000 population Year ending 30 June 2023	8.9	10.9
Home fire safety checks carried out by fire and rescue service per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2023	3.4	9.3
Fire safety audits per 100 known premises Year ending 31 March 2023	2.9	2.0
Availability of wholetime pumps Year ending 31 March 2023	100.0%	
Availability of on-call pumps Year ending 31 March 2023	58.6%	

Incidents attended in year ending 30 June 2023

Total
6,555

All fires, 1,490 (23%)

Non-fire incidents, 1,907 (29%)

False alarms, 3,158 (48%)
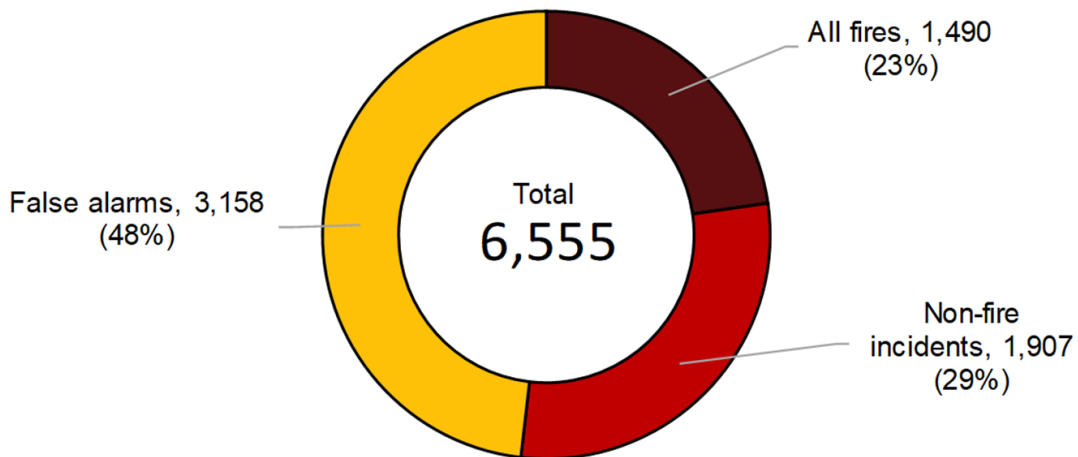
Workforce

|	Oxfordshire	England
Five-year change in total workforce 2018 to 2023	2.8%	1.4%
Number of firefighters per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2023	0.78	0.61
Percentage of firefighters who are wholetime Year ending 31 March 2023	40.6%	65.5%

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

■ Firefighters ■ Workforce □ Local population

10.4%

15.6%

50.6%
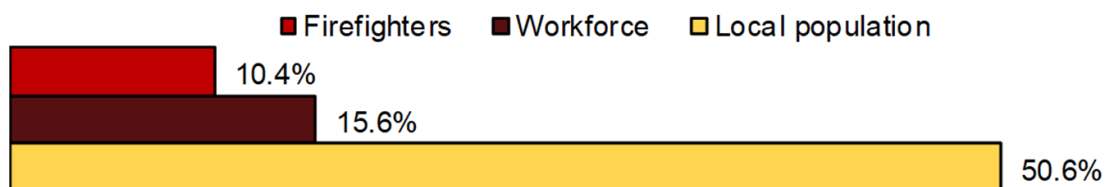
Percentage of firefighters, workforce and population who were from ethnic minority backgrounds as at 31 March 2023

■ Firefighters ■ Workforce □ Local population

6.8%

7.8%

22.2%
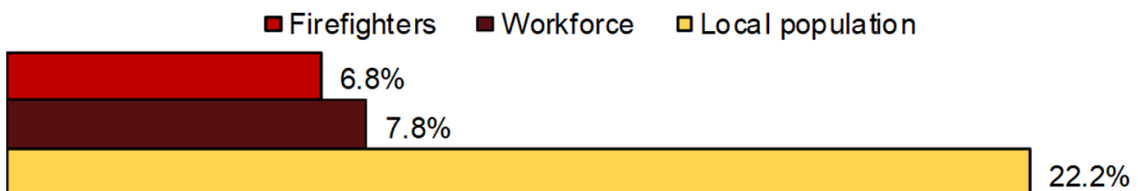
References to ethnic minorities in this report include people from White minority backgrounds but exclude people from Irish minority backgrounds. This is due to current data collection practices for national data. For more information on data and analysis in this report, please view the 'About the data' section of our website.

Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies

<div style="background-color:#c0440e; color:white;">Adequate</div>

Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service is adequate at understanding risk.

Each fire and rescue service should identify and assess all foreseeable fire and rescue-related risks that could affect its communities. It should use its protection and response capabilities to prevent or mitigate these risks for the public.

Area for improvement

> The service should make sure it has a prompt process to provide firefighters with access to up-to-date risk information on its mobile data terminals.

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

Main findings

The service is meeting the objectives of its community risk management plan

The service's community risk management plan (CRMP) describes how the service intends to use its prevention, protection and response activities to mitigate or reduce the risks and threats the community faces both now and in the future. Its current CRMP covers the years 2022–26. The service is currently reviewing these activities to help it provide a more efficient and effective service.

The main risks the service has identified include an aging and fast-growing population, expanding commercial and technological industries, the university population and climate issues including flooding and heatwaves.

The service reviews new and emerging risks in a quarterly meeting. It also provides annual updates to the public about its progress and achievements in its 'Community Safety Services Annual Report'.

The service effectively identifies risks in its communities

In our previous inspection, we found that the service had assessed a suitable range of risks and threats using a thorough community risk management planning process. In its assessment of risk, it used information it had collected from a broad range of internal and external sources and datasets. These included historical incident data, census data, data from partners like Thames Valley Police and data about the local population, including demographics, deprivation and health. We are satisfied that the service is still using a range of data to inform its change programme, which it refers to as the community safety services review.

When appropriate, the service has held constructive dialogue with its communities and other relevant parties to understand risk and explain how it intends to mitigate it. The service works with the county council to develop its consultation programmes and intends to consult with the public on plans during 2024 and 2025.

The service needs to make sure site-specific risk information is updated promptly

The service routinely collects and updates information about the highest-risk people, places and threats it has identified. These include high-rise buildings, care homes, hospitals, waterways and some commercial and domestic premises.

Staff at the locations we visited, including firefighters and emergency control room staff, were able to show us that they could access risk information to help them resolve incidents safely. In our last inspection, we issued an area for improvement: "The service should make sure that fire control has direct access to relevant and up-to-date risk information." The service has worked hard to address this. Control room staff can now access site-specific risk information for all its highest risk places.

But the service doesn't make sure that information on new and updated risks is promptly uploaded to the mobile data terminals in its fire engines. We found that there is no set time frame for site-specific risk information to be added to these terminals. We were told that capacity for updating this information has reduced, and that in some cases it has taken up to six months to add new information. This means that the service can't effectively reduce and mitigate risk. The service needs to improve this, so staff in response roles can always access the information they need.

The service builds its understanding of risk from its operational activity

The service recorded and communicated risk information effectively. It also routinely updates risk assessments and uses feedback from local and national operational activities to inform its planning assumptions. It has a good process for gathering learning from its own staff after an incident.

For example, the service identified an emerging risk due to the closure of a main road in and out of the city of Oxford. By analysing historical incident and response data and having early discussions with the county council, the service established a temporary wholetime crew at a fire station that is usually only crewed by on-call staff. This made sure it could respond promptly to fires and other incidents while the road was closed. The service monitored the use of this crew for six months, then determined it was no longer required.

Preventing fires and other risks

<div style="background-color:#c0520a; color:white;">Adequate</div>

Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service is adequate at preventing fires and other risks.

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

Areas for improvement

> The service should evaluate its prevention activity, so it continues to understand what is most effective.

> The service should make sure it allocates enough resources to meet the increasing and specific risk it has identified in its community risk management plan and prevention strategy.

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

Main findings

The service's prevention strategy is focused on those most at risk, but it needs to make sure that it has enough resources

The service's prevention strategy is clearly linked to the risks it has identified in its CRMP. The service has four strategic priorities for the term of the CRMP, which covers the years 2022–26. These support the service in achieving its purpose of protecting the community, reducing harm and saving lives.

The service's teams work well together and with other relevant organisations on prevention, and they share relevant information when needed. The service uses information from a range of sources to adjust its planning assumptions and direct activity between its prevention and response functions. For example, one station area, which has a high number of safe and well referrals, works closely with the prevention team to make sure it provides the right support to the people they visit. These referrals are often made by staff in the NHS, social care or Thames Valley Police. In the year ending 31 March 2023, the service reported 1,903 prevention visits (which include home fire safety checks and safe and well visits) that were referrals from other agencies.

But the service should make sure it allocates enough resources to its prevention strategy. We were told that there isn't enough capacity in the prevention team to provide all the specialist advice required. The service hasn't clearly stated what prevention resources it needs to support an increasing population and focus on people identified as most vulnerable to fires and other risks. A project to target new single parents hasn't yet started due to insufficient capacity, and the service doesn't co-ordinate its campaigns as well as it used to. The service should make sure that it has enough trained staff to meet the risks identified within its CRMP.

In the year ending 31 March 2023, the service completed 2,544 safe and well visits. This is equivalent to 3.5 visits per 1,000 people in the population, which is lower than the rate for fire and rescue services across England of 5.35 per 1,000 population. The number of visits is lower compared to the previous year when it completed 3,104 visits.

The service prioritises its safe and well visits for the most vulnerable

The service uses a risk-based approach to clearly prioritise its safe and well referrals for people most at risk from fire and other emergencies. For example, in the year ending 31 March 2023, 90.7 percent of the service's safe and well visits were for those most vulnerable to fire. This includes people who are living alone and are over the age of 65 or living with a disability.

The service has trialled the use of risk profiles using socioeconomic and health data, in two of its station areas. These are designed to help target people who might not be referred for a safe and well visit by anyone else. We were told that the service hadn't fully evaluated the trial yet, or had the capacity to further analyse the data, so it hadn't rolled out the approach any further. We look forward to seeing this develop over the remaining term of the current CRMP.

The service carries out a range of interventions, which it adapts to the level of risk in its area. In the service's performance report for 2022/23, it identified that 32 percent of its visits required onward referrals to other organisations for further support. But we found that the service had several referrals for safe and well visits that hadn't yet been carried out. Some of those referrals met the service's high-risk threshold, meaning they should be visited within 48 hours, but still hadn't been contacted after a month.

The service should assure itself it is managing the risk of not meeting its own timescales for visits.

Staff are confident and well trained to complete safe and well visits

Staff told us they have the right skills and confidence to make safe and well visits. These visits cover an appropriate range of hazards that can put vulnerable people at greater risk from fire and other emergencies.

Staff in the prevention team have completed training in safeguarding, mental health, handling aggressive behaviour, alcohol awareness and modern-day slavery. This means they have the skills they need to complete higher-risk referrals. Firefighters explained that, if they don't feel confident in providing all the support needed, they will request additional support and visits by the prevention team.

The service is good at responding to safeguarding concerns

Staff we interviewed told us about occasions when they had identified safeguarding problems. They told us they feel confident and trained to act appropriately and promptly. They are aware of other agencies that can support the most vulnerable people they visit, and feel confident in identifying and working with them.

Staff members' safeguarding training is refreshed every three years and recorded on the service's systems. Many staff were very positive about the improvement in providing feedback on concerns they raise.

The service collaborates with other organisations

The service works with a wide range of other organisations to prevent fires and other emergencies. These include:

- Thames Valley Police, to reduce injuries and accidents on the roads, especially involving cyclists, motorcyclists and pedestrians;
- trading standards and traveller services, to provide fire safety education to the more vulnerable residents in the community;
- schools, to provide education to children of different ages about fire, road and water safety – each year the service provides safety education to school children during a 13-week programme called Junior Citizens; and
- environmental health, housing associations, health providers and the county council's social care teams, to provide and receive safe and well referrals.

We found good evidence that the service routinely refers people at greatest risk to organisations that may better meet their needs. The service's performance report says that it made 467 onward referrals for falls prevention and sensory impairments. Arrangements are in place to receive referrals from other organisations, including social and health care providers, trading standards and the police. In the year

ending 31 March 2023, 1,903 of the referrals the service received were from these organisations.

The service routinely exchanges information with other public sector organisations about people and groups at greatest risk. It uses this information to challenge planning assumptions and target prevention activity. For example, the service receives regular information about oxygen users from public health colleagues, which triggers a safe and well visit. It plans to work with these colleagues in future to target its prevention activity to the 10 most deprived areas of the county.

The service is tackling fire-setting behaviour

The service has a range of suitable and effective interventions to target and educate people with different needs who show signs of fire-setting behaviour. This includes staff trained in the National Fire Chiefs Council's fire-setters intervention scheme.

When appropriate, the service routinely shares information with relevant organisations to support the prosecution of arsonists. It also provides interventions to keep people safe from arson, such as fireproof letter boxes. The work the service does to tackle this is proportionate to the number of deliberate fires in the county.

The service should continue to evaluate whether its prevention work is meeting the needs of the community

The service has good evaluation tools in place to measure how effective its activity is and to make sure all sections of its communities get appropriate access to the prevention services that meet their needs. But it hasn't had the capacity to complete the same number of thorough evaluations we reported in our last inspection.

We found limited evidence that the service has evaluated how effective its activity is or that it makes sure all its communities get appropriate access to prevention activity that meets their needs. For example, it has yet to evaluate the risk profiling approach mentioned earlier. It has also had problems accessing some of the safe and well information it records following a visit, due to planned upgrades to its system. This is preventing it from being able to continually monitor and provide accurate data about its work.

The service uses an annual calendar to help stations to plan when to provide safety messages to the community about issues like flooding and wildfire. But the service doesn't co-ordinate or monitor this work to make sure it is effective.

In our last inspection, we found that the service was seeking feedback from people it visited following a safe and well referral. But we have found little evidence that it is continuing to routinely gather this feedback and use it to improve what it does. As a result, the service is missing opportunities to improve its prevention work for the public.

Protecting the public through fire regulation

<div style="background-color:#c0450a;color:white;">Adequate</div>

Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service is adequate at protecting the public through fire regulation.

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

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure it has an effective quality assurance process, so staff carry out audits to a consistent and appropriate standard, and that are focused on reducing risk.

The service should make sure it effectively addresses the burden of unwanted fire signals.

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

Main findings

The service has a clear protection strategy, which is aligned with its CRMP

The service's protection strategy is linked to the risks it has identified in its CRMP. It has identified high-risk buildings from the different types of industries in Oxfordshire and those buildings where more vulnerable people may live, work or study.

Staff across the service are involved in this activity, effectively exchanging information as needed. For example, following an audit of a premises, the protection team notifies relevant stations and the control team about the issues identified. The service then uses information to adjust planning assumptions and direct activity between its

protection and response functions. Following a successful prosecution, the service has added a themed inspection for buildings where horses are kept into its plans.

But it isn't clear from the service's strategy what level of protection activity it aims to carry out. And it isn't clear how it evaluates what benefits this activity provides to the public. Much of the service's activity in this area is reactive, rather than being focused on proactively targeting all high-risk premises through the risk-based inspection programme. The service should make sure that its risk-based inspection programme includes all the highest-risk buildings in its area and determines clearly how often they should be reinspected.

The service is completing the audits identified in its risk-based inspection programme

The service's risk-based inspection programme is focused on the service's highest-risk buildings. This includes buildings with certain 'sleeping risks', such as hotels, and those where vulnerable people may be living, such as care homes and high-rise residential buildings. The service's staff audit these properties either annually or every three years.

The audits we reviewed had been completed within the timescales the service has set itself. But there were some anomalies in assessment of the level of risk for some buildings. And staff aren't clear what targets the service has set to help it achieve its risk-based inspection programme.

In the year ending 31 March 2023, the service completed 578 fire safety audits. But 67 percent of these audits resulted in an evaluation of 'satisfactory'. A high proportion of audits categorised as satisfactory could mean that the service isn't targeting higher-risk buildings.

Staff don't have a consistent target for completing fire safety audits. Audits should be identified by the service's risk-based inspection programme. But staff explained to us that many of the audits they carry out come from other sources and aren't routed through the risk-based inspection programme.

The service completes fire safety audits to a good standard

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

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

The audits we reviewed were completed to a good standard. And most were in line with the service's policies. Some of the audits completed after a fire, where fire safety legislation applies, were completed outside the two-week time frame the service has set itself. The service should make sure that audits are carried out within its timescales or, if they aren't, that the reason for this is recorded.

The service should quality-assure its fire safety audits to maintain their standard

The service carries out some quality assurance of its protection activity. Managers dip sample completed audits to check for consistency. But this process isn't routinely followed by all managers, and the service's recording system doesn't identify which audits have been reviewed.

The service has good evaluation tools in place to measure how effective its activity is. But it needs to use these tools to make sure all sections of its communities get appropriate access to the protection services that meet their needs.

The service takes enforcement action when required

The service has increased its use of the full range of its enforcement powers, and when appropriate it prosecutes those who don't comply with fire safety regulations. It has recently completed a successful prosecution which related to a breach of the fire safety order at a premise where horses were kept. This has led to learning being shared nationally, and the service is now following up with fire safety audits at other similar premises.

In the year ending 31 March 2023, the service issued 182 informal notifications. During our inspection fieldwork, it wasn't able to tell us how many alteration notices, enforcement notices and prohibition notices it issued in the same year. However, since then the service has assured us that it issued these notifications when appropriate. It completed seven prosecutions in the five years from 2018/19 to 2022/23.

The service has enough staff to complete all its protection activity

The service has enough qualified protection staff to meet the requirements of its risk-based inspection programme and carry out reactive work such as building consultations. From year ending 31 March 2018 to 31 March 2023, the service has increased the number of qualified staff in the protection team from 10 to 15 people. This helps it provide the range of audit and enforcement activity needed, both now and in the future.

Staff get the right training and work towards appropriate accreditation.

The service plans to adapt to new legislation

Since our last inspection, the Building Safety Act 2022 and the Fire Safety Regulations 2022 have been introduced to bring about better regulation and management of tall buildings. The Fire Safety Regulations 2022 introduced a range of duties for the managers of tall buildings. These include a requirement to give the fire and rescue service floor plans and inform them of any substantial faults to essential firefighting equipment, such as firefighting lifts.

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

The service is supporting the introduction of the Building Safety Regulator. It expects these arrangements to have a limited impact on its other protection activity.

The service works with other organisations to complete fire safety activity

The service works closely with other enforcement agencies to regulate fire safety and it routinely exchanges risk information with them. These include housing associations, building control, environmental health and the Care Quality Commission. Some of this work is structured, while other work is done on a case-by-case basis.

The service is responding well to an increasing number of building consultations and licensing requests

The service responds to all building consultations on time. This means it consistently meets its statutory responsibility to comment on fire safety arrangements at new and altered buildings. In the year ending 31 March 2023, the service received 675 building consultations and 199 licensing consultations. All of these were responded to within the required time frame.

The service proactively works with businesses

The service proactively works with local businesses and other organisations to promote compliance with fire safety legislation. It has produced online content in different languages to help local businesses comply with fire safety legislation.

It also has partnerships with a range of primary authority schemes.

The service could do more to reduce unwanted fire signals

The service is taking only limited action to reduce the number of false alarms, referred to as unwanted fire signals. In the year ending 31 March 2023, the service attended 3,116 false alarms. This is 47.5 percent of all its incidents. This number has increased year on year from 2020/21 when 2,694 false alarms were attended and 2021/22 when 2,972 were attended. This response rate is higher than the national rate for false alarms of 39.3 percent. Of the fire false alarms, 79.3 percent were due to faulty fire safety equipment.

This means fire engines may not be available to respond to genuine incidents because they are attending false alarms. It also creates a risk to the public if more fire engines travel at high speed on the roads to respond to these incidents.

The service is due to consult the public on changing how it responds to unwanted fire signals. At the time of inspection, no changes had been made to fully address the area for improvement identified in our last inspection. Therefore, the area for improvement remains.

Responding to fires and other emergencies

<div style="background-color: #c0440a; color: white; padding: 10px;">Adequate</div>

Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service is adequate at responding to fires and other emergencies.

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

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure it completes its review of the response strategy and that any new approach provides the most appropriate response for the public.

The service should make sure it has an effective system to monitor and apply the learning it gathers from operational incidents.

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

Main findings

The service is reviewing its response strategy

The service's response strategy is linked to the risks it has identified in its current CRMP. The service is carrying out a comprehensive review of station locations, crewing systems and working patterns, to help it respond flexibly to fires and other emergencies. It calls this change programme the community safety services review. We look forward to seeing the progress of this work and any resulting changes.

The service isn't achieving its response standards, but it is managing its resources to maintain attendance times

There are no national performance standards for responding to the public. But the service has set out its own response standards in its CRMP. It aims to arrive at emergencies:

- within 11 minutes on 80 percent of occasions; and
- within 14 minutes on 95 percent of occasions.

The service reported that in 2022/23 it didn't achieve its targets. It reached 72 percent of emergencies within 11 minutes and 84 percent of emergencies within 14 minutes. This is a decrease from the previous year. Home Office data shows in the year ending 31 March 2023, the service's response time to primary fires was 11 minutes and 10 seconds. This is an increase from the service's previous response time to primary fires, which was 10 minutes and 35 seconds in 2021/22.

The service recognises that it isn't making reasonable improvements towards meeting its response standards. This is mainly due to a decrease in the availability of its on-call fire engines. The service anticipates that its community safety services review, which includes a comprehensive analysis of its operating model, will help it make improvements and achieve these standards.

We were pleased to find that the service has addressed the problem of control staff knowing whether there are enough breathing-apparatus-qualified staff on board its on-call fire engines. The service has made sure this information is updated for control staff, and it has also made sure that the Thames Valley fire services have aligned their breathing apparatus equipment and procedures.

The service's fire engines aren't always available

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

The service monitors the availability of its fire engines. In the year ending 31 March 2023, it had an overall annual availability of 67.9 percent. The service did achieve 100 percent availability with its wholetime fire engines and 58.6 percent with its on-call fire engines. The rural demographics of the county, and the service being predominantly on-call while having difficulties recruiting on-call staff, may have some effect on availability.

The service provides its incident commanders with regular training

The service has trained incident commanders, who are assessed regularly and properly. This helps the service safely, assertively and effectively manage the whole range of incidents it could face, from small and routine ones to complex multi-agency incidents.

As part of our inspection, we interviewed incident commanders from across the service. The service makes sure that all relevant staff are assessed in command competence every two years. And regular training activities and exercises are provided for incident commanders. They were familiar with risk assessing, decision-making and recording information at incidents in line with national best practice, as well as the Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles (JESIP).

Control staff are invited to contribute to service debriefs and exercises

We were pleased to see that the service's control staff are integrated into its command, training, exercise, debrief and assurance activity. However, control staff explained that they aren't always able to attend these activities due to staffing shortages. They provide written feedback when possible.

The service maintains good risk information for use at incidents, but needs to improve the process to make sure this information is updated promptly

We sampled a range of risk information on the service's systems, including the information for firefighters responding to incidents at high-risk, high-rise buildings and the information held by fire control.

The information we reviewed for identified risk sites was up to date and detailed. Staff could access and understand it. Encouragingly, this was an area for improvement identified in our last inspection that is now closed. The service has a good process in place to make sure that control staff are provided with up-to-date risk information.

But there are delays to new and changed risk information being added to mobile data terminals. The service should make sure its process for updating mobile data terminals with new and updated risk information is carried out promptly.

The service follows national operational guidance when it responds to incidents

The service makes sure that staff command incidents in line with national operational guidance. Monitoring officers routinely complete feedback forms to record information and learning for individuals and the service. The service's training plans and materials are aligned with national operational guidance. It exchanges risk information with appropriate organisations, such as the other Thames Valley fire and rescue services, to produce joint operational information notes.

We were pleased that staff we interviewed were confident in the use of operational discretion. They know when to use their professional judgment in an unforeseen situation at an incident, and are confident that the service will support their decisions. The service monitors the use of operational discretion through its assurance team to make sure learning is identified.

The service should make sure it effectively records and tracks how it uses learnings from incidents

As part of the inspection, we reviewed a range of emergency incidents and training events. These included major incidents such as wildfires and flooding, and incidents which required a higher than usual number of fire engines or unusual rescues.

We were pleased to see the service has improved this process and has carried out more structured debriefs in 2023. Staff were aware of when a structured debrief should be carried out and could identify learning from recent operational learning notes, which have been introduced to help share learning. This was an area for improvement in our last inspection which the service has worked hard to address.

We were also encouraged to see the service is contributing towards, and acting on, learning from other fire and rescue services and emergency service partners. This is published on the service's 'maintenance of competence' system, which records when operational staff access it.

But the process to record learning gathered from a debrief is still complex. This means that the service doesn't always act on all the learning it has – or should have – identified from incidents. Some incidents, including significant fires and motorway collisions involving heavy goods vehicles, had limited debrief submissions and inadequate tracking of resulting actions. This means the service isn't routinely improving the way it fulfils its duties to the public. This is now an area for improvement.

The service keeps the public informed during incidents

The service has good systems in place to inform the public about ongoing incidents and help keep them safe during and after incidents. This includes using social media and (for large-scale incidents) the county council communications team and local resilience forum.

Responding to major and multi-agency incidents

Adequate

Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service is adequate at responding to major and multi-agency incidents.

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

Area for improvement

> The service should make sure it has an effective method to share fire survival guidance information with multiple callers and with its firefighters.

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

Main findings

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

The service has effectively anticipated and considered the reasonably foreseeable risks and threats it may face. These risks are listed in both local and national risk registers as part of its community risk management planning. For example, the service has planned for the risk of incidents at its regional airports, shopping centres and COMAH sites, as well as for major incidents such as flooding and heatwaves. These plans were initiated during the inspection due to large-scale flooding in January 2024.

It is also familiar with the significant risks neighbouring fire and rescue services may face, and which it might reasonably be asked to respond to in an emergency. These include risks which are up to 10 km outside the service's border. Firefighters have access to this risk information from neighbouring services via their mobile data terminals and mobile devices.

The service should address all Grenfell Tower inquiry recommendations

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

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

We found the service has well-developed policies and procedures in place for safely managing this type of incident. However, these policies and procedures aren't properly understood by all staff at all levels. We found a good level of understanding among level two incident commanders, but firefighters and some level one incident commanders have limited knowledge.

The service has carried out only a limited amount of realistic training and exercises at tall buildings. This hasn't included all staff groups that would be expected to respond to an incident of this nature. For some staff, who aren't in the immediate vicinity of a high-rise building, their training has not involved practical, on-site exercises.

At this type of incident, a fire and rescue service would receive a high volume of simultaneous fire calls. We found that the systems in place in the service aren't robust enough to receive and manage this volume of calls. The service has developed an electronic system to support staff to manage this information, but it hasn't yet been fully adopted. At the time of our inspection, we were told that control staff didn't have the capacity to implement this new system in a way that would work for all Thames Valley services.

The service relies too heavily on paper-based systems to record fire survival guidance information. These systems are too open to operator error. They also mean that staff in the emergency control room, at the incident and in assisting control rooms can't share, view and update actions in real time. These systems could compromise the service's ability to safely resolve a major incident at a tall building.

The service works well with other fire and rescue services

The service supports other fire and rescue services responding to emergency incidents. It is interoperable with these services and can form part of a multi-agency response. The service is leading the work to provide a shared fire investigation unit with the other Thames Valley fire services and the police, supporting them to meet the national standards in this area. All Thames Valley services now use compatible breathing apparatus to support their borderless response to incidents.

The service has successfully deployed to other services and has used national assets such as using the Thames Valley fire services incident command unit and water rescue boats for recent flooding incidents.

The service carries out cross-border exercises with other fire and rescue services

The service carries out cross-border exercises with neighbouring fire and rescue services, helping them work together effectively to keep the public safe. These exercises help them plan for the risk of major events at which the service could foreseeably give support or ask for help from neighbouring services. These exercises have recently included a high-rise building over the border in the Swindon area, for which the service might need to respond. We were encouraged to see the service uses feedback from these exercises to inform risk information and service plans.

Incident commanders have a good understanding of JESIP

The incident commanders we interviewed had been trained in and were familiar with JESIP. They spoke positively of recent multi-agency training that had taken place and of the inclusion of JESIP.

The service could give us strong evidence that it consistently follows these principles. This includes providing in-house training and middle management quarterly update sessions, as well as externally accredited training to its incident commanders.

But the service should make sure that it is taking the opportunity to carry out robust debriefs after all its multi-agency incidents and exercises. It may not be identifying any problems it has with applying JESIP. This could compromise the service's ability to respond effectively with other emergency services when major incidents do occur.

The service is an active part of the local resilience forum

The service has good arrangements in place to respond to emergencies with partners that make up the Thames Valley local resilience forum. These arrangements include strategic and tactical planning and co-ordination for major and multi-agency incidents.

The service is a valued partner of, and it chairs, the chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and explosive group. It also co-chairs the technical communications group. The service takes part in regular training events with other members of the local resilience forum and uses the learning to develop planning assumptions about responding to major and multi-agency incidents. The service was part of a wide area flooding exercise in October 2023 and a no-notice exercise at Oxford football club. Organisations involved in a no-notice exercise aren't told it will happen in advance. This means that the exercise assesses how quickly organisations can respond to a scenario – just like they would need to in a real situation.

The service shares and contributes to national learning

The service makes sure it knows about national operational updates from other fire and rescue services and joint organisational learning from other organisations, such as the police service and ambulance trusts. It uses this learning to inform planning assumptions that it makes with partner organisations. But the local resilience forum recognises the need to make sure this happens consistently, and so is introducing a new group, which includes the service, to review the information.

The service has improved its staff's understanding of marauding terrorist attacks

In our last inspection, we identified an area for improvement that the service should make sure it is well prepared to form part of a multi-agency response to a marauding terrorist incident, and that its procedures for this are understood by all staff and are well tested.

We were encouraged to find that the service has developed its online training package to improve understanding of marauding terrorist attacks and has taken part in regional exercises to test its procedures for this. The area for improvement is now closed.

Making best use of resources

Oxfordshire 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 them with their risks and statutory responsibilities. Services should make best possible use of resources to achieve the best results for the public.

The service's revenue budget for 2023/24 is £26.7 million. This is a 4.1 percent increase from the previous financial year.

Areas for improvement

The service needs to show a clear rationale for the resources allocated between prevention, protection and response activities. This should reflect, and be consistent with, the risks and priorities set out in its community risk management plan.

The service should assure itself that all processes in place to support performance management are effective.

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 its community risk management plan.

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

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

Main findings

The service works closely with the county council to manage its financial plans

The service is part of Oxfordshire County Council's Community Safety Services Directorate. It works closely with the county council to make sure it is sustainable. Following evidence-based funding bids, the service has secured capital funding for investment in its estate. This will support the service in achieving some of the objectives of its CRMP.

It builds its plans on sound scenarios. Regular in-year budget reviews and using its contingency budget to cover unforeseen costs help make sure the service is sustainable. The council plans to make the maximum rise in the council tax precept (the amount of council tax revenue allocated to fire and rescue services) and has allowed for rises in inflation and a higher than anticipated pay award. The service's financial plans are underpinned by financial controls that reduce the risk of misusing public money.

The service needs to better allocate its resources to manage its risks

The service sometimes uses its resources well to manage risk, but there are weaknesses that need addressing. These include understanding the impact of prevention and protection activity in mitigating risk, to make sure the service has the right number of qualified staff in these teams.

The service needs to understand the impact of having various on-call contracts in place both on its people and on its fire cover. The service sometimes struggles to make sure fire engines are available at times of peak demand such as during morning rush hour and midweek evenings.

The service's workforce plans, including allocating resources to prevention, protection and response, aren't consistent with the current risks and priorities it has identified in its CRMP and department strategies. The rationale for the way the service allocates resources to its prevention and protection teams isn't clear.

There is evidence that some areas of the service are under-resourced, which leads to increased risk and affects staff welfare. Staff in prevention who carry out high-risk visits have little to no resilience in their team to manage increasing workloads. And a vacancy in the performance team still needs to be filled. Some middle managers we spoke to told us they have high workloads, and their teams don't have the capacity they need.

The service is evaluating its mix of crewing and duty systems as part of its current CRMP. It knows it must analyse its response cover to make sure it can deploy its fire engines and response staff to manage risk efficiently. We look forward to seeing the results of the community safety services review at our next inspection.

The service needs to improve how it manages performance

The service's arrangements for managing performance have changed since our last inspection. Its performance dashboard hadn't been available since March 2023 due to the expiry of its software licence. At the time of our inspection, the service hadn't yet put a new system in place. Although the service has department and station plans with clear objectives, staff were unsure how these objectives achieve the CRMP priorities. A new meeting structure had been introduced to try to reduce the amount of time managers were spending in meetings, but many managers felt that this wasn't providing the same robust understanding of performance and risk management. The change was yet to be evaluated by the service.

The service explained that it is moving to a new performance management system, one which is already well established in the county council. This should support the service to get back to actively managing performance on a more regular basis.

The service doesn't understand how it uses its wholetime firefighters. It doesn't accurately collect data on how they spend their time across day and night shifts. It doesn't make the most of this capacity. For example, some staff told us they have targets to achieve and record what they have done locally, but others didn't. Staff in both prevention and protection teams were unclear about their targets. The service should do more to make sure its workforce is as productive as possible. This remains an area for improvement from our last inspection.

The service recognises it could reduce its use of overtime and number of temporary roles. In 2022/23 the service spent over £625,000 on overtime to make sure that fire engines were available at the right locations. The service was reviewing this as part of its CRMP community safety services review.

The service has identified financial savings from collaborations, but it should do more to understand all the benefits of its collaborations

We were pleased to see the service meets its statutory duty to collaborate. It routinely considers opportunities to collaborate with other emergency responders. For example, the service works closely with South Central Ambulance Service to train firefighters in casualty care. And it works with Thames Valley Police on projects that support the Right Care, Right Person initiative.

Collaboration generates some savings. The service told us through the joint procurement of fire engines and breathing apparatus between the three Thames Valley fire services, £583,000 of savings were reportedly made in the year ending 31 March 2023.

We are satisfied that the service monitors, reviews and evaluates the benefits and results of its collaborations. But its reviews and evaluation are limited in scope, and the service doesn't use them to learn or change decisions. The service is leading the shared fire investigation project on behalf of the Thames Valley fire and rescue services, but has yet to complete the evaluation to fully realise the benefits of this joint project. This remains an area for improvement from our last inspection.

The service plans for events that might affect its usual functioning

The service has good continuity arrangements in place for areas in which it considers threats and risks to be high. It regularly reviews and tests these threats and risks so that staff know the arrangements and their associated responsibilities. For example, the service set up its operational and communications cells while planning for potential industrial action in 2022/23. But the service couldn't be sure how many fire engines would be available to respond to an incident if there was an extended period of industrial action. It could seek support from the military, but this still might not result in the service being able to provide its standard level of response.

The service shows sound financial management

The service carries out regular reviews of all its expenditure, including its non-pay costs. This scrutiny makes sure it gets good value for money. The service anticipates that through these expenditure reviews it will achieve its target of £95,000 savings in 2023/24. It has also identified that it could save money by improving staff attendance at its occupational health appointments, as it is charged when they don't attend.

The service is taking steps to make sure it achieves efficiency gains through sound financial management and best working practices. It is doing this in important areas such as estates, fleet and procurement through a full review of its operational model.

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

Adequate

Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service is adequate at making the service affordable now and in the future.

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

Areas for improvement

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

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

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

Main findings

The service has ambitious plans to improve value for money

As part of the Community Safety Services Directorate within Oxfordshire County Council, the service continues to have a sound understanding of future financial challenges. It plans to mitigate its main or significant financial risks. For example, the service has access to a contingency budget held by the County Council to cover unforeseen pay and price inflation. This was used to fund the higher-than-anticipated pay award for firefighters.

The service's underpinning financial assumptions are relatively robust, realistic and prudent. They take account of the wider external environment and some scenario planning for future spending reductions. The service, with support from the county council, has modelled fuel inflation over the next 10 years so it can better forecast inflationary pressures.

The service is carrying out a community safety services review to identify more efficient and effective ways of working. This work includes a review of its operational model to reflect changing risk and lower demand, including fleet and estates requirements. It also includes consideration of how it can improve staff productivity, use new technologies and further develop how it works with other organisations. While this review will take place during 2024, the service has already identified some areas where it can become more efficient or generate additional income, including:

- changing its policy for responding to unwanted fire signals;
- reducing the number of false alarms it responds to, so firefighters can spend more time on productive tasks; and
- generating income from unused parts of the Rewley Road fire station site following its redevelopment.

The service has clear arrangements for the use of reserves

Reserves are held by Oxfordshire County Council. There is a robust process for the service to access them if they are needed.

The service has started to improve its fleet and estates

We were encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since our last inspection. The service's estate and fleet strategies have been reviewed. And the service has made initial improvements to some buildings by accessing county council decarbonisation funding for solar panels and air source heat pumps. The service has ambitious plans to redevelop some of its fire stations as part of the community services review.

Both the estate and fleet strategies exploit opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness. The service will start to replace some of its ageing fleet in 2024. This will reduce the cost of maintenance for some of its older vehicles.

The service needs to make sure it maintains the momentum of these developments. It should regularly review these strategies so that it can properly assess the effect any changes in estate and fleet provision, or future innovation, have on risk.

The service should make the most of technology to improve productivity

The service made some improvements since our last inspection, which includes introducing new IT systems for prevention and protection activity. But in our latest inspection we found that this progress hadn't continued.

The service hasn't considered how changes in technology and future innovation may affect some of its work. For example, the service has been without its performance monitoring system since March 2023. This has resulted in some staff not understanding what is expected of them.

We also found that some of the service's IT systems still result in staff duplicating work or having to find workaround solutions, including:

- staff in protection using two electronic records to manage their workload due to the new system being incomplete;
- staff in prevention losing access to historical data for previously completed safe and well visits, meaning they can't see what had been previously done following a referral;
- the system for operational availability not supporting the management of on-call contracts; and
- the operational assurance team being without a system to monitor and track learning outcomes.

The area for improvement, to make the most of opportunities to improve workforce productivity and develop future capacity using innovation and technology, remains.

The service should make sure it has the capability for its transformation plans

The service has limited capacity and capability to bring about sustainable change. It works with others to improve efficiency, but the benefits aren't well defined and aren't guaranteed. For example, through the county council's IT provision the service has access to the council's wide area network and expertise for software development. But the process for making sure it has the right systems and equipment lacks oversight and robust project management.

The service has ambitious transformation plans for this and its next CRMP. It should assure itself that it has the right skills in place to manage and complete the changes needed across the organisation.

The service seeks funding to support it to improve road safety

The service actively considers and exploits opportunities for generating extra income. Where appropriate, the service has secured external funding to invest in improvements to the service it gives the public. This includes seeking funding from the Bikeability Trust to support the service to provide road safety education to children and young people.

Promoting the right values and culture

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

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

Areas for improvement

The service should assure itself that senior managers are visible and demonstrate service values through their behaviours.

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

The service should monitor secondary contracts to make sure working hours aren't exceeded.

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

Main findings

The service's values are clear but aren't demonstrated by all staff

The service has a clearly defined set of values that are aligned with the county council values and with the Core Code of Ethics. But it should improve awareness of them among its staff at all levels. Some staff we spoke to in on-call stations weren't aware of the values.

Most staff told us they are proud to work for the service and showed a positive commitment to their work. But the culture of the organisation doesn't always align with

its values. Although not widespread, some behaviours we saw or were told about didn't meet the standards expected. Some of the poor behaviours staff told us they had experienced at work included inappropriate and racist language. And staff described managers who shouted at them and others if they were struggling.

We found that in some parts of the service there wasn't a strong culture of challenge. Some staff didn't have the confidence to challenge poor behaviour or report this to their line managers. Disappointingly, we heard from one member of staff that they had been told to stop raising issues. Although the workforce has welcomed the introduction of a confidential reporting line, and some staff felt confident in challenging inappropriate behaviour, not everyone had confidence in this. Some felt that appropriate action isn't always taken by managers to challenge unacceptable behaviours. But it is positive that when issues have been raised through the service's reporting channels, they have been investigated and action taken as a result.

Some staff felt that senior leaders don't always act as positive role models. We were told that there is a disconnect at different levels of the service, and in the senior leadership team. Some staff told us about inconsistent approaches to decision-making and that information doesn't always filter down effectively from senior leaders. Staff described some leaders as not being as approachable or visible as they once were, due to the increase in remote working since the pandemic.

Of those who responded to our staff survey, we found that 61 percent (72 out of 119) agreed that their senior leaders consistently model and maintain the service's values. This is a reduction from the previous staff survey, when 95 percent (111 out of 117) agreed with the statement. But it is positive that in our latest inspection, 92 percent (110 out of 119) agreed that their colleagues consistently model and maintain the service's values.

The service provides good well-being support to its workforce, but work-related stress isn't being fully addressed

The service continues to have well-understood and effective well-being policies in place, which are available to staff. But some old policies that have been replaced were still available to view, leading to some managers applying policy inconsistently.

A significant range of well-being support is available to support both physical and mental health. For example, the service continues to provide good occupational health support, including access to a general practice doctor, nurse and physiotherapy.

There are good provisions in place to promote staff mental well-being. These include counselling sessions provided by the employee assistance programme and good critical incident debriefs. Of those who responded to our staff survey, 91 percent (112 out of 123) agreed that they feel able to access services to support their mental well-being.

But some staff reported that their well-being is being affected by excessive workloads. Middle managers said that their workloads have increased due to a reduced cohort and needing to manage staff uncertainty about the change programme, on top of their usual duties. And some felt that developing their careers was impossible alongside the challenges of day-to-day work. The senior leaders are aware of the increased work-related stress staff are reporting and have commissioned a culture survey to understand what more could be done to address this.

The service has good health and safety policies, but is still not monitoring the working hours of staff

The service has effective and well-understood health and safety policies and procedures in place. In our staff survey, 96 percent (118 of 123) of respondents agreed that they understand the policies and procedures the service has in place to make sure they can work safely.

These policies and procedures are readily available, and the service promotes them effectively to all staff. Both staff and representative bodies have confidence in the health and safety approach the service takes. Staff are trained regularly via a mandatory e-learning package and health and safety-related qualifications.

But we found that the service still needs to fully implement the process to manage the decontamination of kit in some stations. Staff have raised concerns about some stations' facilities and the different approaches being taken.

During our last inspection we highlighted that the service wasn't doing enough to monitor staff who have secondary employment or dual contracts, to make sure they comply with the secondary employment policy and don't work excessive hours. The service has made limited progress in addressing this, and so the area for improvement remains.

Absence management processes are clear and well promoted

We were pleased to find that the service had updated its absence management processes, and provided clear guidance for managers, who are now more confident in using the process. Most staff we spoke to thought that the service manages absences well and in accordance with policy. This was an area for improvement in our last inspection, which is now closed.

Getting the right people with the right skills

Adequate

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

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

Areas for improvement

The service should assure itself that all staff are appropriately trained for their roles, especially where specialist skills are required to implement the community risk management plan.

The service should address the high number of staff in temporary promotion positions.

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

Main findings

The service regularly reviews its workforce, but it has too many staff in temporary roles

The service has good workforce planning for all operational roles. Its plans are still subject to consistent scrutiny in the form of regular meetings to discuss overall operational requirements.

Through its planning process, the service is aware that there are a high number of staff in temporary roles. This is causing delays to some improvement projects and inconsistent performance management in prevention, protection and response. Some staff reported feeling frustrated by so many changes in middle and senior management.

The service has good processes to monitor operational workforce skills

Most staff told us that they could access the training they need to be effective in their role. In our staff survey, 80 percent (99 of 123) respondents agreed that they have received sufficient training for their role.

The service's training plans make sure they can maintain operational competence and capability effectively. The service is part way through its training plan cycle and intends to evaluate the process to make sure it continues to be effective for all staff, including those in on-call roles. The service expects its on-call staff to maintain the same competency levels as wholetime firefighters, but in a reduced amount of time, which is proving challenging. Some on-call staff reported not having effective support to be able to gain the required skills quickly enough. We look forward to seeing what the service learns and changes through this evaluation.

The service continues to monitor operational staff competence through monthly performance reports, training team and management meetings. It regularly updates its understanding of staff skills and risk-critical safety capabilities. This approach means the service can identify gaps in workforce capabilities and resilience. It also means it can make sound and financially sustainable decisions about current and future needs.

The service has improved its provision of breathing apparatus training

In our last inspection, we identified an area for improvement for the service to make sure it has the capacity to make sure staff are trained and assessed promptly in safety-critical skills, such as using breathing apparatus.

The service has worked hard to reduce the number of staff waiting to complete an assessment in this risk-critical skill, and as such this area for improvement is now closed. It has provided additional breathing apparatus training courses over the year and reassessed the course programme following feedback. The service should continue to maintain this approach to make sure it can mobilise its fire engines with well-trained firefighters.

The service should make sure learning opportunities are accessible to all staff

Although the service provides some learning and development, it doesn't always meet the needs of its staff, or indeed of the service. For example, to make the changes the service needs to support its CRMP, it knows it will require more staff with project management and communication skills. But the service is reliant on the county council to provide some of the project management and communication expertise it needs, rather than building the skills of its own staff in these areas. The lack of extra capacity and capability is likely to affect what the service can offer the public.

Some staff told us that they can access the range of learning and development resources they need to do their job effectively using the operational training planner, e-learning site and county council training courses. But other professionals still reported having limited access to the specialist skills courses that would help them to develop in their careers. And some staff feel that there is an inconsistent approach to leadership and management training, in topics such as discipline and grievance. In our staff survey, only 57 percent (70 of 123) of respondents agreed that they are given the same opportunities to develop as other staff in the service.

Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity

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

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

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure it has processes in place to communicate and consult with staff about change programmes.

The service should make sure it appropriately addresses problems it identifies through its staff survey, and that it promptly communicates to staff any actions it takes as a result.

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

The service should make sure it has robust processes in place to undertake equality impact assessments and review any actions agreed as a result.

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

Main findings

The service seeks staff feedback, but should continue to act on the issues raised and make sure it communicates with all staff about its change programme

The service has developed several ways to work with staff on issues and decisions that affect them. This includes methods to build all-staff awareness of fairness and diversity, as well as targeted initiatives to identify matters that affect different staff groups. For example, 'keeping you connected' online sessions are held by the senior leaders, giving staff an opportunity to raise concerns and ask questions of senior leaders. The service collates feedback from these sessions, face-to-face station visits and its own staff surveys.

Representative bodies and staff associations reported that the service works with them well. The service meets with them every six weeks and are consulted at an early stage about the community safety services review options, the service's change programme.

More recently, staff have lost confidence in the service's feedback processes and think they are no longer effective. We were told that staff have raised concerns about the impact of high workloads and the change programme. But there was little evidence of any action being taken as a result, and staff had no confidence that anything would be done.

In our staff survey, 66 percent (80 of 123) of respondents felt that change wasn't handled well by the service. Staff are proud to work for the service and are keen to have regular updates about the community safety services review and senior leadership direction. The service should make sure it plans and provides regular communication with staff about the change programme, and about actions taken in response to staff surveys.

The service should review how it tackles bullying, harassment and discrimination

The service should improve staff understanding of bullying, harassment and discrimination, including its duty to eliminate them. In our staff survey, 9 percent (11 of 123) of respondents told us they had felt bullied or harassed and 13 percent (16 of 123) had felt discriminated against at work over the past 12 months. On 14 occasions these concerns were reported either formally or informally.

Although the service has clear policies and procedures in place, some staff have limited confidence in how well the service can deal effectively with cases of bullying, harassment and discrimination, as well as grievances and discipline. Some staff also lack confidence in dealing with these situations themselves. Managers are receiving training in challenging inappropriate behaviour. But not all of them are using this to make sure that they challenge all inappropriate behaviours. Some staff said they don't feel confident in raising an issue as it may negatively affect their career progression or make the situation worse.

The service has reduced disproportionality in its recruitment processes

There is an open, fair and honest recruitment process for staff or those wishing to work for the fire and rescue service. The service has an effective system to understand and remove the risk of disproportionality in recruitment processes. Disproportionality is when a certain group of people (for example, people of a certain ethnicity or age group) are affected by the service's actions in a way that is substantially different from people not of that group.

The service carries out positive action events at some of its on-call stations and has recently been nominated for awards to recognise its on-call campaign materials. These have been developed to encourage people with different backgrounds who might be interested in becoming on-call firefighters.

The service has put considerable effort into developing its wholetime recruitment processes so that they are fair and potential applicants can understand them. It reviewed the process and made changes which have resulted in a more diverse range of candidates. Its operational recruitment policies are comprehensive and cover opportunities in all roles. The service retains all records from each recruitment process so they can be evaluated and analysed for further improvement.

The service has made some improvements to increasing staff diversity at some levels of the organisation. The proportion of firefighters that identified as being from an ethnic minority background has increased from 6 percent (31 people) in 2021/22 to 6.8 percent (36 people) in 2022/23. The proportion of firefighters who identified as a woman has increased from 9.2 percent (52 women) to 10.4 percent (60 women) over the same period.

The service's own performance report identifies that in 2022/23, 28 percent of new on-call joiners were women. Staff were positive about being kept informed of recruitment campaign progress by the service. But the service has no clear strategy in place to support it to increase diversity through its workforce planning.

For the whole workforce, in 2022/23, 7.8 percent identified as being from an ethnic minority background compared to 22.2 percent in their local population and 8.5 percent throughout all fire and rescue services. The proportion of the workforce who identified as a woman was 15.6 percent, compared to an average of 19.4 percent throughout all fire and rescue services. The service knows it could still do more to better reflect its local communities.

Equality, diversity and inclusion isn't being actively promoted in the service

The service needs to improve its approach to equality, diversity and inclusion. In our last inspection, we reported positively on the service's approach to this. The deputy chief fire officer chaired an inclusion group, and activity in the service was reported as driving positive change. Disappointingly, this strategic support has reduced with the changes in senior management. And there has been inconsistent attendance at the inclusion group due to staff having less capacity.

This reduction in capacity has also resulted in the service not providing the training it had hoped to on the equality impact assessment process. Although the service has a good process in place to assess equality impact and use data to make informed decisions, it doesn't properly assess or act on the impact on each protected characteristic.

It is positive that in our staff survey, 94 percent (116 of 123) of respondents agreed that they have access to gender-appropriate workplace facilities, and that staff described completing equality, diversity and inclusion training during their induction and via e-learning.

But we found that understanding of equality, diversity and inclusion varied across the service. Some staff are invested in increasing awareness of diversity in the service and supporting national campaigns such as International Women's Day. But others described this as only ticking a box for personal development, and told us they skipped through the training materials as quickly as possible. Training isn't mandatory and we found inconsistencies in the training records for staff, with some not having completed any training in equality, diversity and inclusion for over four years.

The service has recently advertised for a cultural engagement officer. We look forward to seeing the impact this role has in supporting the service to improve its culture for equality, diversity and inclusion.

Managing performance and developing leaders

Requires improvement

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

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

Areas for improvement

The service should improve the way all staff understand and apply the performance development review process.

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 it has an effective process in place for succession planning, including senior leadership roles.

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

Main findings

The service should make sure performance reviews are consistent

The service continues to have an inconsistent process in place for performance and development. Not all staff have specific and individual objectives or have had their performance assessed in the past year. Through our staff survey, 50 percent (61 of 123) of respondents told us they have had a formal personal development review/appraisal in the last 12 months.

Staff don't always think the system is fair. For some it is just a box-ticking exercise to check they are up to date with their competencies, although others felt that the process is a valuable opportunity to discuss personal development related to their progression. These staff said it had helped them. In our staff survey, 59 percent (72 of 123) of respondents agreed that the one-to-one conversations they have with their line manager are helping them to achieve their full potential.

A training pack and guidance has been made available to staff. We saw posters in stations which promoted the performance review process. But not all staff were aware of the details of the process. The area for improvement identified in our last inspection remains. The service should improve understanding and use of the performance development review process among all its staff.

Staff don't perceive the promotion and progression process as fair

The service has put considerable effort into developing its promotion and progression processes. It has trialled a promotion gateway process for two of its managerial levels. But not all staff perceive this to have been a fair process. In our staff survey, only 41 percent (50 of 123) of respondents agreed that the promotion process is fair.

The service needs to do more to make sure its promotion and progression processes are understood and fair. Staff described that the new gateway process required a lot of work to prepare for, and that some staff who hadn't passed were still provided with a temporary promotion opportunity. Staff also felt that the promotion panels weren't as diverse as those for recruitment.

The service still doesn't manage temporary promotions well, and we found evidence of them being in place for longer than they should be. In the year ending 31 March 2023, there were 58 temporary promotions in the service, lasting on average for 370 days. These temporary promotions are being used to cover gaps in the service's succession planning. The service should make sure its succession plans are effective and clearly communicated.

The service aims to diversify its future leadership

The service knows it needs to go further to increase workforce diversity, especially in middle and senior management. It has put in place plans to address this. These include the recruitment of a direct entrant at station manager level, opening some promotion opportunities to support staff, and having well trained and diverse recruitment panels.

The service needs to improve how it develops leaders and identifies high potential staff

The service needs to improve the way it actively manages the career pathways of staff, including those with specialist skills and those with potential for leadership roles. In our staff survey, 59 percent (73 of 123) of respondents agreed that they have opportunities to develop their career in the service.

The service has some talent management schemes in place to develop leaders and high-potential staff, but it doesn't manage all of them openly or fairly. For example, recent temporary opportunities haven't all been advertised externally, and there has been a lack of transparency around the way appointment decisions are made. This has resulted in inconsistency and undermines staff perception of fairness in the process.

The service should consider putting in place more formal arrangements to identify and support members of staff to become senior leaders. Progress against this area for improvement identified in our last inspection has been limited, so it remains.

Although the service has begun to make sure staff receive the most appropriate level of management training, it needs to do more to make sure it implements the December 2022 'Leading the Service' and 'Leading and Developing People' fire standards effectively.