HMICFRS

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

Fire & Rescue Service 2023–25

Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service

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Changes to this round of inspection

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

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

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

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

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

This report sets out our inspection findings for Bedfordshire 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 Bedfordshire 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	Responding to major incidents	Preventing fire and risk	
	Future affordability	Right people, right skills	Public safety through fire regulation	
		Promoting fairness and diversity	Responding to fires and emergencies	
		Managing performance and developing leaders	Best use of resources	
			Promoting values and culture	

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

HMI summary

It was a pleasure to revisit Bedfordshire 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 a few aspects of the performance of Bedfordshire 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.

We were disappointed to find that the service hasn't made the progress we expected since our 2021 inspection.

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

- There has been a deterioration in the way the service allocates its resources to risk and drives its community risk management plan (CRMP) priorities. We found examples of the service not making expected progress against its 2022/23 CRMP action plan, including developing plans to target its resources at the most vulnerable and high-risk members of the community.
- The service hasn't taken sufficient action to improve its low on-call activity and has challenges with maintaining fire control staffing levels. It isn't meeting its own response standards and call-handling times.
- The service needs to improve its productivity. It has completed two productivity reviews, which identified opportunities for its firefighters and fire control staff to make better use of their time. But progress has been slow. And it is still reliant on several paper-based systems, which are inefficient and don't support productive working.
- The service takes advantage of opportunities to secure external funding and generate income. It is taking steps to make sure it achieves efficiency gains through sound financial management and best working practices. It is actively growing business opportunities in collaboration activities such as estate and fleet.
- The service needs to improve succession planning. It struggles to be competitive in the national recruitment market and is facing challenges in recruiting and retaining a skilled workforce. As such, it doesn't fill staff vacancies quickly enough or have a clear plan for managing the effect of increased workloads. Support staff don't have an effective workforce plan.
- The service has established values and behaviours in line with the Code of Ethics Fire Standard developed by the Fire Standards Board. Behaviours that reflect service values are shown at all levels across the service and we found that they were understood by everyone. Staff are proud of the service, its work and their own contribution.
- The service needs to improve diversity in the workforce. The workforce doesn't reflect the diversity of the communities it serves, and more could be done to address disproportionality in recruitment and retention.
- The service needs to be better at handling staff grievances. It doesn't always deal with grievances within the time frame it has set itself. Many staff are frustrated and don't have confidence in using the grievance process.
- Development for on-call firefighters needs to improve. The service has a positive learning culture, and training opportunities are available in order to support staff. However, we found that it didn't do enough to support on-call firefighters to develop.

- The service can't assure itself that its firefighters meet the minimum fitness requirements. There has been a decline in this area, and this is a cause of concern. In view of these findings, we have been in regular contact with the chief fire officer as I don't underestimate how much improvement is needed.

My report sets out the more detailed findings of this inspection. I will continue to check the service's progress in addressing areas for improvement and will monitor the cause of concern and associated recommendation.

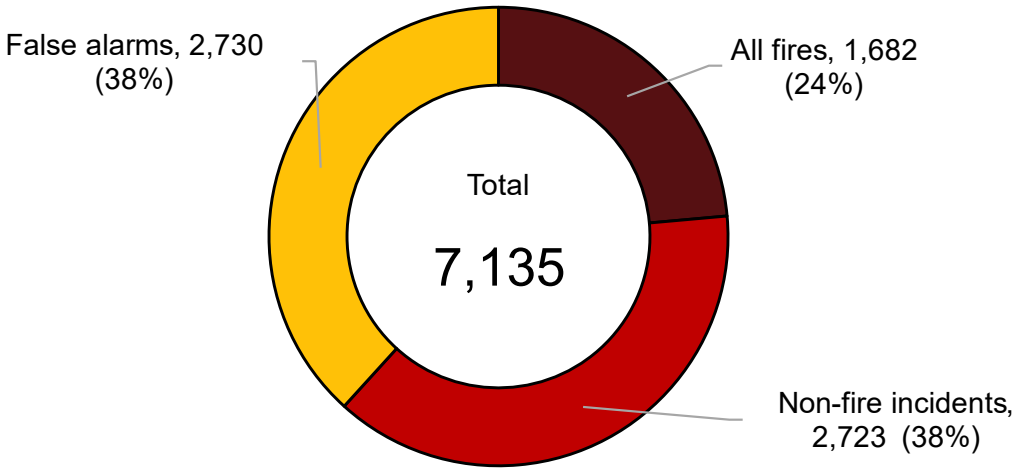
Roy Wilsher

HM Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Service in numbers

Profile	Bedfordshire	England
Area Square miles	477	50,370
Population (thousands) June 2022	706	56,536
Population density Thousands per square mile	1.5	1.1
Cost		
Funding Year ending 31 March 2022	£31.4m	£2.5bn
Expenditure per population Year ending 31 March 2022	£45.75	£41.88
Response		
Incidents attended per 1,000 population Year ending 30 June 2022	10.1	10.3
Home fire safety checks carried out by fire and rescue service per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2022	11.8	7.7
Fire safety audits per 100 known premises Year ending 31 March 2022	2.9	2.0
Availability of wholetime pumps Year ending 31 March 2022	97.6%	
Availability of on call pumps Year ending 31 March 2022	46.9%	

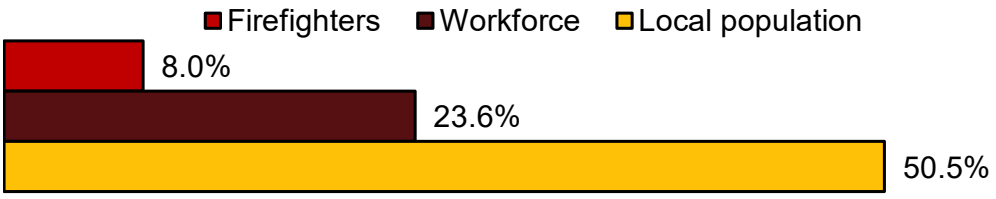
Incidents attended in the year to 30 June 2022



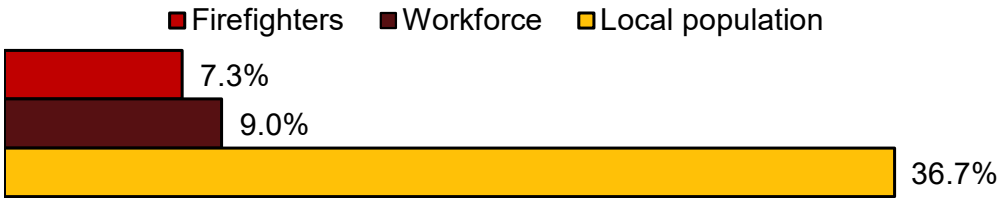
Workforce

	Bedfordshire	England
Five-year change in total workforce 2017 to 2022	5.8%	0.2%
Number of firefighters per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2022	0.62	0.62
Percentage of firefighters who are wholetime Year ending 31 March 2022	65.7%	65.2%

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



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



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

Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies

Good

Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service is good at understanding risk.

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

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

Main findings

The service is good at identifying and understanding community risk

The service has assessed a suitable range of risks and threats using a thorough community risk management planning process. In its assessment of risk, it uses information it has collected from a broad range of internal and external sources and data sets. This includes a community risk analysis (an assessment of community risk level) and a strategic assessment (an analysis of the external factors called PESTELO).

The service is improving how it works with its community

In our last inspection, an area for improvement was that the service should build a comprehensive profile of risk in its service area to improve how it works with its local community.

In this inspection, we considered how the service has adapted its engagement activity, and we are satisfied the service has addressed this area. The service now has an improved, effective communications and engagement strategy, which is analysed annually against its CRMP.

When appropriate, the service has consulted and held constructive dialogue with its communities and other relevant parties to understand risk and explain how it intends to mitigate it. Since our last inspection, the service has carried out two consultation cycles for its CRMP. It offers a choice of paper-based or online consultation as well as the opportunity to attend community events. It has improved the number of responses from 471 in 2021/22 to 746 in 2022/23.

The service has improved the diversity of the groups it consults with. For example, it has written to and received responses from:

- 52 community groups, including faith, community and youth groups;
- business groups, including Bedfordshire Chamber of Commerce;
- sports clubs, including Luton Town Football Club and the two championship rugby teams;
- infrastructure organisations, including Luton Airport;
- universities and colleges; and
- heritage and arts organisations.

The CRMP should have supporting plans to drive activity

The service identifies and assesses the risks in the community to inform strategy. Once it has assessed risks, it records its findings in the CRMP. This plan describes how the service intends to use its prevention, protection and response activities to mitigate or reduce the risks and threats the community faces both now and in the future. For example, flooding is identified as a high risk by the local resilience forum (LRF). The forum has prepared a multi-agency flood plan to make sure there is an effective, co-ordinated response to significant flooding events. The CRMP includes a comprehensive resourcing strategy. However, the service needs to assure itself that the underpinning plans detail how that strategy will be implemented. For example, we found little evidence explaining how prevention would target high-risk people in the community and what activities were required to achieve this.

The service has good processes in place to share risk information across the organisation

The service routinely collects and updates the information it has about the highest-risk people, places and threats it has identified. This includes its corporate risk register, site-specific information and major incident plans. We note that the service has introduced a business management information system that tracks progress against the risks in the corporate risk register to inform strategic teams.

We sampled a broad range of the risk information that the service collects. We found that risk information on areas such as Control of Major Accident Hazards (COMAH) sites and high-rise buildings was accessible on mobile data terminals and the mobilisation system.

This information is readily available for the service's prevention, protection and response staff. This means these teams can identify risk, but they need to do more to reduce and mitigate risk effectively. Where appropriate, the service shares risk information with other organisations. For example, information about buildings that don't comply with fire safety regulations is shared with local authorities and building control teams.

Staff at the locations we visited, including firefighters and fire control staff, were able to show us that they can access, use and share risk information quickly to help them resolve incidents safely. Staff who were trained in using the applications told us they are confident in the effectiveness of the technology and their ability to use it.

Despite this work, we aren't assured that this results in the service meeting its CRMP priorities of targeting those people most at risk.

The service needs to improve how it uses local and national learning to inform its understanding of risk

The service updates risk assessments and uses feedback from local and national operational activities to inform its planning assumptions. For example, the senior leadership team meets quarterly to review the corporate risk register, which is reported to the fire and rescue authority.

The service makes sure staff read urgent risk information. It shares national and multi-agency learning from joint organisation learning and national operational learning in several ways, for example by using safety flashes and in-service red bulletin publications. (Red bulletins are aimed at operational firefighters and contain information such as updates and learning from incidents.) However, we found the service could be more consistent in acting on local learning from operational activity.

Preventing fires and other risks

Requires improvement

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

Fire and rescue services must promote fire safety, including giving fire safety advice. To identify people at greatest risk from fire, services should work closely with other organisations in the public and voluntary 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 develop a clear prevention plan that implements the prevention strategy in its community risk management plan. The prevention plan should target people most at risk and make sure the level of activity is proportionate to reduce that risk.

The service should make sure it targets its prevention work at people most at risk.

The service should make sure it quality assures its prevention activity, so staff carry out safe and well visits and home fire safety visits to an appropriate standard.

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

Main findings

The prevention strategy needs a plan to support and drive activity

The service's prevention strategy is outlined in its CRMP, which aims to target the most vulnerable high-risk people in Bedfordshire. However, the service's plans don't always reflect this aim, meaning that only a low percentage of high-risk individuals are visited. In 2021/22, the proportion of home fire safety visits (HFSVs) targeted at vulnerable groups is relatively low at 45.7 percent. The service told us that it doesn't collect data on disability effectively.

The service uses station plans to inform operational crews about their required prevention work, but this isn't underpinned by a comprehensive prevention policy. The number of HFSVs in a station plan is decided at a performance management meeting and communicated to staff by the station commander. Some staff reported that station plans were target driven rather than based on those people identified as being most at risk.

The service should develop a clear prevention plan that implements the prevention strategy in the CRMP.

The service has introduced a person-centred approach to HFSVs

In our last inspection, one of the areas for improvement was that the service should make sure it targets its prevention work at people most at risk. While the service has made some progress, it still needs to be more effective at specifically targeting high-risk members of the community and achieving its own objectives. More work is needed to make sure it continues to improve.

Since our last inspection, we were encouraged to see the contribution that staff have made to progress this work. For instance, the service has:

- introduced an online safe and well referral portal on its website and improved referral routes for other organisations;
- introduced a new person-centred HFSV process that reduces the use of paper and improves productivity;
- provided prevention training, which staff told us has given them the confidence and right skills to carry out prevention activities; and
- implemented a more comprehensive risk-scoring system to make sure it builds an accurate community risk profile.

In February 2023, the service moved away from a safe and well visits process to the new HFSV process. We reviewed prevention records for both processes and found that they weren't consistent. High-risk cases weren't visited within the defined time frames.

Home office data shows that of the 8,418 home fire safety checks conducted by the service in 2021/22, 3,846 were targeted at vulnerable groups. This means less than half of all home fire safety checks were targeted at the three most vulnerable groups.

Positively, over the last five years, England has seen an overall reduction in dwelling fires, and Bedfordshire has contributed to this. The number of dwelling fires in Bedfordshire decreased from 0.66 per 1,000 population in 2017/18 to 0.4 per 1,000 population in 2021/22. This is a larger decrease than that achieved by any other service.

We recognise that the service has made some improvements. However, it needs to evaluate if these new processes are effective at targeting and prioritising those most at risk and can be achieved within the appropriate time frames.

Staff are confident they have the right skills to make the community safer

The service has recently introduced a new HFSV process. The HFSVs cover an appropriate range of hazards that can put vulnerable people at greater risk from fire and other emergencies. Staff told us they have the right skills and confidence to complete HFSVs. However, this wasn't always the case with the previous process of safe and well checks.

Staff also spoke positively of the improvements in prevention training, which includes e-learning and more detailed guidance, and welcomed the recent implementation of the HFSV power app.

Prevention activity requires a quality assurance process that is consistent

In our last inspection, one of the areas for improvement was that the service should make sure it quality assures its prevention activity so that staff carry out safe and well visits to the appropriate standards.

In this inspection, we found that the service had some informal ways of monitoring safe and well activity. For example, watch commanders check entries that firefighters have made on the prevention data system, and there is some evidence of quality assurance for the new HFSV process. However, not enough progress has been made.

We found that the service didn't have a quality assurance policy in place. The service told us this is in development, and we look forward to seeing the outcomes.

Staff are proud of the safeguarding process

The service continues to make improvements to safeguarding arrangements. Staff told us about occasions when they had identified safeguarding problems and felt confident and trained to act appropriately and promptly. We found that the safeguarding policy was robust. Safeguarding training is structured and aligned with national best practice and NFCC guidance.

The service has restructured prevention to include a specialist role that co-ordinates safeguarding activity. Staff have regular contact with the safeguarding officer and receive feedback from them on specific cases.

Staff are proud of the work they achieve and feel valued.

The service works well with other organisations to keep people safe

The service works with a wide range of other organisations to prevent fires and other emergencies. These include the East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust (EEAST), Bedfordshire Police and National Highways. As part of a road safety advisory group, it leads on Biker Down and participates in BikeSafe initiatives.

We found good evidence that it consistently referred people at greatest risk, when identified, to organisations that may better meet their needs. These organisations include the local authority and social care and healthcare providers.

Arrangements are also in place to receive referrals from others such as the home oxygen service from BOC. On receiving a referral, the service has a process in place to contact very high-risk referrals within five days.

The service routinely exchanges information with other public sector organisations about people and groups at greatest risk. The service shares data with EEAST to help with health collaboration activities, in particular to be able to respond to incidents in the community. For example, a dedicated multi-agency trips and falls team responds to vulnerable people who fall in their homes. It has been able to treat life-threatening injuries and prevent some need for hospital admittance. The team operates across Bedford, Central Bedfordshire and Luton. The service has calculated that the social value of the trips and falls team is £1.053m. Of the incidents the trips and falls team attended, 70 percent of patients who were treated were able to stay in their homes without needing hospital admittance.

The service works well with other organisations to tackle fire setting

The service has a range of suitable and effective interventions to target and educate people in specific age groups with different needs who show signs of fire-setting behaviour. For example, safety awareness and fire education target young people who present a risk around fire. The service also participates in a school education programme.

When appropriate, the service routinely shares information with relevant organisations to support the prosecution of arsonists. It uses its website to share arson prevention advice.

The service is improving its evaluation of prevention activities

The service has good evaluation tools in place to measure how effective its activity is. It makes sure all sections of its communities get appropriate access to prevention services.

Prevention initiatives that are part of the programme management office automatically include a learning log and an evaluation.

The service has evaluated its collaboration with EEAST, which includes:

- co-responding to incidents;
- making effective entry to domestic properties to assist ambulance crews;
- the trips and falls team; and
- bariatric complex patient rescue.

The service told us that, in 2020/21, these activities added up to a return on investment of £5.09m in social value, or £7 for every £1 invested.

Protecting the public through fire regulation

Requires improvement

Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at protecting the public through fire regulation.

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

Areas for improvement

The service should assure itself that it has effective systems and processes in place to manage its risk-based inspection programme.

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

The service should have effective processes to manage the burden of false alarms (unwanted fire signals).

The service should make sure it works with local businesses and other organisations to share information and expectations on compliance with fire safety regulations.

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

Main findings

The protection strategy forms part of the CRMP

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

Staff across the service are involved in this activity, effectively exchanging information as needed. For example, operational staff work with protection, prevention and local authority housing teams to conduct joint visits to houses in multiple occupation that have enforcement notices. The service then uses information to adjust planning assumptions and direct activity between its protection, prevention and response functions.

The risk-based inspection programme can't assure the service that all high-risk premises have been identified

We found protection teams were professional, dedicated and hardworking.

In our last inspection, we said that the service didn't have effective systems and processes in place to manage its risk-based inspection programme.

In this inspection, we found that not enough improvement had been made in this area. The service has an interim risk-based inspection programme, but it can't assure itself that the programme identifies all high risks based on a wide range of data. It has an ongoing project called the 'risk data warehouse' to improve its understanding of risk. It told us that the risk data warehouse should help it to categorise risk and apply this assessment to more than 26,000 buildings in the county. This will help generate a permanent risk-based inspection programme. Staff told us they are expecting the risk data warehouse to identify more high-risk buildings. However, there is no predicted completion date for the risk data warehouse project, and there are no considerations or plans for managing additional workload.

The service should make sure fire safety records are audited consistently

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

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

Not all the audits we reviewed were completed in a consistent, systematic way or in line with the service's policies.

We identified that premises in the interim risk-based inspection programme hadn't been re-inspected within the specified time periods. The service told us this was due to having a reduced number of staff qualified to complete fire safety audits.

The service isn't following national guidance for auditing high-risk premises. This means that it can't assure itself that it is fully mitigating risk.

The service has introduced a quality assurance policy for fire safety

In our last inspection, one of the areas for improvement was that the service should make sure it has an effective quality assurance process so staff carry out audits to an appropriate standard.

Since then, the service has introduced a new policy that outlines the role, responsibilities and procedures for fire safety quality assurance. However, it is still unable to implement it and so we don't consider that it has made sufficient progress in this area.

The service is exercising its powers as an enforcing authority

In our last inspection, one of the areas for improvement was that the service should assure itself that its enforcement plan prioritises the highest risks and includes proportionate activity to reduce risk. It should also include appropriate monitoring and evaluation. We are satisfied the service has addressed this area.

The service consistently uses its full range of enforcement powers, and when appropriate, it prosecutes those who don't comply with fire safety regulations.

In 2021/22, the service issued no alteration notices, 241 informal notifications, 6 enforcement notices and 21 prohibition notices, and undertook 2 prosecutions.

Resourcing is still a challenge, but training is improving

The service doesn't have enough qualified protection staff to support its audit and enforcement activity. However, it has introduced a competency framework, which is developing staff to meet future demand. Staff get the right training and work to appropriate accreditation.

According to HMICFRS data, the number of competent protection staff declined from 18 in 2020/21 to 13 in 2021/22. Protection staff in development increased from three in 2020/21 to five in 2021/22. Currently, the service doesn't have sufficient numbers of qualified staff to carry out high-risk audits.

The service is adapting 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.

The service is supporting the introduction of the Building Safety Regulator. We found the service had good arrangements in place to receive this information and update operational staff on risk.

Staff are completing training to adapt to the new legislation as part of their fire safety competency framework. However, the service should update its policies to reflect the current work that is being carried out.

The service works with local organisations to take joint action

The service works closely with other enforcement agencies to regulate fire safety and it routinely exchanges risk information with them. For example, the service works regularly with local organisations in housing and building control to make sure joint fire safety action is taken in new and existing buildings.

The building consultations process has been realigned with priorities

The service doesn't always respond to building consultation requests within statutory limits. According to HMICFRS data collection, in 2021/22 the service responded to only 84.7 percent of its licensing and building regulation consultation requests on time. This means organisations didn't receive a timely response to their consultation requests. Staff told us that this was due to capacity. Since then, the service has realigned consultations with statutory responsibilities, and we found it was meeting 97 percent of requests within the 21-day time frame.

The service can improve how it works with local businesses

The service should improve how it works with local businesses and other organisations to share information and expectations on compliance with fire safety regulations. It doesn't have an overarching business engagement strategy so work is limited in this area.

Reducing unwanted fire signals

The service is taking only limited action to reduce the number of false alarms (unwanted fire signals). In 2021/2022, according to the Home Office data, 38.7 percent of incidents were false alarms. This has rarely changed since 2016 and indicates the service hasn't taken sufficient action to affect this.

During this inspection, we found that most staff felt the reduction of unwanted fire signals policy wasn't followed and, therefore, wasn't effective.

The service responds to more false alarms than any other type of call. In 2022/23, the service had a higher daily average response rate to false alarms than in previous years. In 2018/19 the average was 10.8 calls; in 2022/23 that rose to 11.9. This means fire engines may not be available to respond to critical 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 should have effective processes to manage the burden of false alarms.

Responding to fires and other emergencies

Requires improvement

Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at responding to fires and other emergencies.

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

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure its response strategy provides the most appropriate response for the public in line with its community risk management plan.

The service should make sure fire control is sufficiently resourced and has resilience arrangements and appropriate fallback cover.

The service should make sure it uses its on-call crews effectively to respond to incidents based on risk in line with its community risk management plan.

The service should do more to align with national operational guidance to improve a co-ordinated response to the most high-risk incidents.

The service should make sure it has an effective system for learning from operational incidents and assure itself that all areas of the service can contribute to debriefs.

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 inconsistent in aligning its response strategy with risk

The service's response strategy is linked to the risks it has identified in its CRMP. The principles of the response strategy are sound in theory: the service's fire engines, response staff and working patterns are designed and positioned to respond flexibly to fires and other emergencies with the appropriate resources. However, the service applies the strategy inconsistently.

The service isn't meeting its response standards

There are no national response standards of performance for the public. But the service has set out its own response standards in its CRMP. During 2021/22, the service stated it will arrive at primary fires within 10 minutes on 80 percent of occasions.

The service doesn't always meet its standards. Home Office data shows that in 2021/22, the service's average response time to primary fires was ten minutes and five seconds, which is seven seconds slower than the average for a significantly rural service. The service achieved its target on only 61 percent of occasions. In the same year, the service had an average call-handling time for primary fires of 1 minute and 47 seconds. This is 21 seconds slower than the average call-handling time for a significantly rural service.

The service should make sure it reviews its response strategy and provides the most appropriate response for the public in line with its CRMP.

We note that the service has plans to review response times as part of an emergency cover review. We look forward to seeing the outcome.

The service should improve fire control resilience and fallback arrangements

Most fire and rescue services have reciprocal arrangements for fallback should their fire control reach capacity as a result of call handling, loss of equipment or the need to change location.

The service has moved to a new cloud-based mobilisation system. As a result, it no longer has an alternative control room that is using the same mobilisation software.

We also found that fire control was understaffed and reliant on pre-arranged overtime to cover shortfalls.

The service should make sure fire control is sufficiently resourced and has resilience arrangements and appropriate fallback cover.

The availability of on-call fire engines doesn't support the response standard

In our last inspection, one of the areas for improvement was that the service should make sure it uses its on-call crews effectively to respond to incidents based on risk, in line with the response standard in its CRMP.

Since our last inspection, the service hasn't made sufficient progress in this area.

The service has 22 fire engines, of which 14 are on-call. It has no on-call availability standard to make sure that these fire engines are available to protect the public.

HMICFRS data collection shows that in the year 2021/22, the service's overall appliance availability was 63.5 percent. Wholetime availability is 97.6 percent and on-call availability is 46.9 percent. This overall availability is significantly lower than the average of all services and is the fourth lowest availability in England.

The service had started an on-call project to address the original area for improvement found in the previous inspection. We found the service had paused the project due to capacity issues but it has now resolved them and restarted it.

Staff have a good understanding of how to command incidents safely

The service has a good process in place to make sure that staff are trained and competent in responding to incidents. It 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.

We found that incident commanders were familiar with risk assessing, decision-making and recording information at critical incidents in line with national best practice and the Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles (JESIP). It was encouraging to hear staff speak positively of the guidance and training provided in this area.

The service's training system, PDR pro, routinely checks operational staff are maintaining their training effectively so they are competent in their roles. For example, the service told us that all station-based operational breathing apparatus wearers have attended a suitable firefighting assessment in the last two years.

Operational firefighters can access risk information easily

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

We found that risk information was up to date and detailed. Staff could easily access and understand it. Encouragingly, it had been completed with input from all areas of the service.

The service exchanges risk information with appropriate organisations, such as partner agencies in the LRF.

The service should align with national operational guidance

We reviewed a range of policies and procedures and found that the service had policies to make sure that staff command incidents effectively. Staff have a good understanding of operational discretion.

Five years after the completion of the national operational guidance (NOG) programme, it is disappointing to find that the service has yet to adopt its principles. By not aligning with NOG, the service risks firefighters being unable to identify and eliminate the hazards that are present at incidents.

We found the service's NOG adoption project was insufficiently resourced and two years behind plan. Disappointingly, we found that it had introduced only 2 of the 23 product packs and that fire control guidance wasn't in the scope of the project.

The service should do more to align with NOG to improve a co-ordinated response to the most high-risk incidents.

The service needs to improve consistency in evaluating operational performance

As part of this inspection, we reviewed emergency incidents and training events. The service has an operational assurance team, which identifies and gathers learning from incidents through the process of debriefing. It also makes sure that any learning identified is shared to help improve the service. We were impressed by the knowledge of the operational assurance team. We found the attitude of team members to be positive and hardworking. However, it has limited capacity to complete debriefs within the appropriate time frames. This limits the service's ability to effectively share learning widely.

Operational staff told us they value debriefs. However, we found that key functions weren't invited, such as fire control, health and safety and communications. The service doesn't always use opportunities to gather learning or act on it. We also found that debrief records lacked consistency. This means the service isn't routinely improving its service to the public.

However, we were encouraged to see that the service is working with other services to learn from national trends. For example, it is leading on a regional national inter-agency liaison officer working group analysing the recommendations from the Manchester Arena Inquiry.

We note that the service had an external audit of its operational assurance function in 2022. The service has taken steps to develop a revised debrief process, but this work is yet to be completed.

The service should make sure it has an effective system for learning from operational incidents and assure itself that all areas of the service can contribute to debriefs.

The service keeps the public informed about ongoing incidents

The service has a press office that is staffed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and is well placed as part of the LRF ‘warn and inform’ group if a major or multi-agency incident occurs. However, we found that the press office function could be used more effectively to support fire control operators and release them to focus on co-ordinating incidents at all levels.

Responding to major and multi-agency incidents

Adequate

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

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

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure it has an effective method to simultaneously share fire survival guidance information with multiple callers and that it has a dedicated communication link in place.

The service should make sure it has an overarching cross-border exercise strategy. The strategy should assure the service that exercise objectives are in line with community risk management plan risks and that learning is recorded, shared and actioned.

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 for 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 is an active member of the LRF. The chief fire officer acts as chair and is encouraging the service to take on more responsibility by leading groups.

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 local COMAH sites and high-rise buildings. Firefighters have access to risk information from neighbouring services. This includes risks identified as a result of the service's agreement with neighbouring services to collect and share information on risks within 10 km of their county borders. These are available on mobile data terminals and the Resilience Direct platform.

The service can respond to major and multi-agency incidents

We found overall that the service had sufficient arrangements in place to respond to major and multi-agency incidents. These include COMAH sites, wildfires, wide area flooding and marauding terrorist events. We found that these arrangements were well understood by staff, accessible on Resilience Direct and accessible to other responders.

The service should address all the 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 hadn't addressed some Grenfell Tower Inquiry recommendations. Also, the procedures that the service follows when it receives a fire survival call are paper based. Paper-based systems are too open to operator error and could compromise the service's ability to safely resolve a major incident at a tall building.

Encouragingly, we found fire control to be highly skilled, competent and professional in its role. It is able to give callers advice on evacuation when managing individual fire calls. But we also found that there wasn't a dedicated communication link between the senior officer in the fire control room and the incident commander.

At this type of incident, a fire and rescue service would receive a high volume of simultaneous fire calls. The mobilisation systems in place would support receiving calls. However, we found that the fallback arrangements in fire control and resilience cover weren't robust enough to receive and manage this volume of calls.

The service should make sure that it has an electronic system to record fire survival guidance information in fire control and display it simultaneously at the bridgehead and in any incident command units.

The service is working with other fire and rescue services

The service supports other fire and rescue services responding to emergency incidents and can form part of a multi-agency response. For example, Bedfordshire crews were deployed out of county to provide mutual assistance to Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service, which declared a major incident for wildfire.

The service has successfully deployed to other services and has used national resilience assets in response to flooding in South Yorkshire, under the national co-ordination and advisory framework.

The service could co-ordinate exercises more effectively with improved corporate oversight

The service is a valued partner and regularly trains and exercises with other members of the LRF. However, it isn't taking the opportunity to transfer learning from LRF debriefs into the service.

We found the service lacks an overarching cross-border exercise plan that links the LRF with neighbouring fire and rescue services to make sure they all work together effectively to keep the public safe.

We found that in 2021/22, the service had completed a range of multi-agency, cross-border and station exercises. However, it didn't have aims and objectives for every exercise or consistently complete and document debriefs.

The service should make sure it has an overarching cross-border exercise strategy. The strategy should assure the service that exercise objectives are in line with CRMP risks and that learning is recorded, shared and actioned.

Incident commanders are demonstrating JESIP principles

We saw evidence that the service consistently follows JESIP. For example, major incident messages include the M/ETHANE model.

We found that, where the service identifies problems with applying JESIP, it takes appropriate and prompt action to resolve them with other emergency service organisations.

The service works with LRF partners effectively

The service has good arrangements in place to respond to emergencies with partner agencies that make up the LRF. These arrangements include a robust notification system to inform partners when a major incident is declared. This helps the service to set up tactical and strategic co-ordination groups with all key responders.

We found that fire control had robust testing arrangements for multi-agency communication and procedures.

The service keeps up to date with national learning

The service makes sure it knows about national operational updates from other fire and rescue services and joint organisation learning from other organisations, such as the police service and ambulance trusts. The service has a comprehensive process for acting on national operational learning and joint organisation learning. It uses this learning to inform planning assumptions that it makes with partner organisations.

Making best use of resources

Requires improvement

Bedfordshire 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 £34.748m. This is a 4.06 percent increase from the previous financial year.

Areas for improvement

The service needs to show a clear rationale for the allocation of resources 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 have effective measures in place to assure itself that its workforce is productive and that its time is used as efficiently and effectively as possible to meet the priorities in the community risk management plan.

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

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

Main findings

The service should effectively allocate resources to meet its objectives

The service builds its financial plans on sound scenarios. They help make sure the service is sustainable and underpinned by financial controls that reduce the risk of misusing public money. Financial planning, financial systems and audit arrangements are all satisfactory.

The service's CRMP has established clear priorities and actions. Financial plans and the resourcing strategy are linked to the objectives in the CRMP. But the supporting plans for prevention, protection and response don't adequately direct resources to meet the service's priorities and manage risk. And the service hasn't effectively allocated resources to progress its CRMP action plan. This has delayed improvements it had planned.

The service should use its resources more effectively to manage risk

The service sometimes uses its resources well to manage risk, but there are several weaknesses that need addressing. For example:

- Fire control is regularly understaffed and relies on overtime to cover shortfalls. The service is becoming more reliant on overtime, and expenditure has increased from around £495,000 in 2020/21 to around £835,000 in 2021/22.
- The service isn't achieving its targets for call-handling or response times.
- The service doesn't have enough qualified protection staff to support its audit and enforcement activity.
- The service can't assure itself that its interim risk-based inspection programme identifies all its high risks.
- The service can't assure itself that prevention activity is targeted at those at highest risk.
- The service has a number of short and long-term vacancies for support staff. This has created single points of failure in some areas of the service, which have affected the progress of projects.
- The service recognises it doesn't have the number of staff it needs. This is affecting its ability to develop and maintain its core functions. Some staff we spoke to said they have unmanageable workloads and their teams don't have the capacity they need.

The service hasn't recently evaluated its mix of crewing and duty systems. Some on-call fire stations have two fire engines. Most of the second fire engines are rarely used or available to attend emergencies. For example, the second on-call fire engines at Biggleswade, Ampthill and Toddington were at incidents less than 1 percent of the time between 1 April 2018 and 30 June 2022. These fire engines also have low availability. In 2021/22, the second fire engine at Ampthill was available less than 18 percent of each month, while those at Biggleswade and Toddington were available less than 10 percent of each month. The service can't show it is managing risk efficiently.

In 2021/22, an on-call improvement project was paused. However, the service has appointed a new project manager to restart the project. The service also told us that it will be reviewing its response cover as part of a project in its next CRMP (2023–27). We look forward to seeing the outcomes of this work.

Some performance processes need to be more effective

The service's arrangements for managing performance don't always link resource use to its CRMP and strategic priorities. But the service is improving these arrangements. For example, it:

- has restructured itself to include a programme management office function, which tracks the CRMP action plan;
- has introduced a business management information system to support the performance management of functions; and
- monitors progress with quarterly updates to the corporate management team.

The 2022/23 CRMP action plan hasn't progressed as the service had intended. Some actions in the plan haven't been started or have been paused due to resourcing. Of the actions that are categorised as 'in progress', many tasks hadn't been achieved within the set time frames.

We found that the implementation of some projects went beyond their initial scope, which contributed to project delays. The service told us that managers would benefit from more support and training to implement project objectives.

Managers told us that the service has a complex reporting structure. They find that making decisions and communicating them are slow. We found that the service's meeting structure could be more efficient in how it operates and more effective at implementing the core functions of the service.

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

The service is taking steps to improve productivity but more needs to be done

In our last inspection, one of the areas for improvement was that the service should make sure it has effective measures to assure itself that its workforce is productive. It should also make sure its time is used as efficiently and effectively as possible to meet the priorities in the CRMP. This relates to the service broadening its focus on productivity to make sure that all its staff are as efficient as they can be and resource plans stay up to date.

Since our last inspection, the service has made some progress to improve staff productivity, but it still needs to do more.

The service has taken steps to understand how firefighters and fire control staff use their time over an average day and night. It has completed two productivity reviews, which considered the daily tasks carried out and identified opportunities to make better use of time. But progress to make these improvements is slow.

The service has yet to action areas which it has categorised as a priority. We were surprised to find it is still reliant on several paper-based systems, which are inefficient and don't support productive working. For example, these include processes in fire control, the fire safety audit system and health and safety checklists used for the induction process.

The service has produced an efficiency and productivity strategy for 2023–27, with an efficiency and productivity board to oversee improvements. We look forward to seeing the results of this work.

The service actively collaborates with others

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 shares a translation and interpretation service and a data protection officer with Bedfordshire Police.

Collaborative work is aligned with the priorities in the service's CRMP. The service aims to work with other fire and rescue services to make efficiencies through sharing back-office functions where possible. For example, it shares an information and communications technology (ICT) service with Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service.

We are satisfied that the service monitors, reviews and evaluates the benefits and results of its collaborations. The service is collaborating with the EEAST to provide an emergency medical co-response to the community. Firefighters from Leighton Buzzard, Harrold and Potton community fire stations are trained by EEAST with enhanced trauma care skills. According to the Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service and EEAST collaboration evaluation, in 2020/21, the service co-responded to 147 incidents, adding a social value to Bedfordshire of £2.244m.

Business continuity arrangements are robust

After our last inspection, one of the areas for improvement was that the service should make sure it has appropriate business continuity arrangements in place which are regularly reviewed and tested and take account of all foreseeable threats and risks.

We were pleased to see the improvements the service has made since our last inspection. The service has introduced a dedicated role that oversees the planning of business continuity arrangements. The service has good business continuity plans that mitigate the high risks and threats identified in its corporate risk register. It regularly reviews, exercises and tests these plans so that staff know the arrangements and their associated responsibilities.

The service also has appropriate business continuity plans for industrial action. It has assured itself and can demonstrate that it has adequate resources available for future periods of industrial action. The plans have been tested in various short-term scenarios and reviewed afterwards. However, it would benefit from testing its plans for scenarios lasting longer than 48 hours.

The service makes sure staff complete a cyber security e-learning module and assessment offered by the National Cyber Security Centre. In addition, using the IASME Consortium's framework, the service completes an annual assessment, called Cyber Essentials PLUS, of how its ICT security controls guard against cyberattacks. This reduces the risk identified in the corporate risk register.

The service has sound financial management

There are regular reviews to consider all the service's expenditure, including its non-pay costs. This scrutiny makes sure the service gets value for money. For example, the fire and rescue authority reviews expenditure on a regular basis. This includes a series of CRMP planning workshops where the authority reviews budgets and financial plans.

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. In 2022/23, the service made procurement savings of £172,000. It uses national and regional procurement frameworks to get the best possible purchasing power. For example, it has saved £23,000 on road traffic collision equipment. It has also carried out some benchmarking with other fire and rescue services to show value for money.

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

Good

Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service is good at making the service affordable now and in the future.

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

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

Main findings

The service understands future financial challenges

The service has a sound understanding of future financial challenges. It plans to mitigate its main or significant financial risks. For example, it has set aside £1m in a pay and pension reserve to cover the effect of a higher-than-budgeted pay award in both 2022/23 and 2023/24. This reserve will be used to help balance the budget in 2023/24.

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

The service has identified savings and investment opportunities to improve the service to the public and to generate further savings. These include savings and increased income generation totalling £701,000 between 2023/24 and 2026/27. However, the service recognises that the higher-than-budgeted pay award does mean it will require additional savings and income generation after 2023/24 to avoid a budget deficit. It is further developing its plans.

The service has clear arrangements for the use of reserves

The service has a sensible and sustainable plan for using its reserves. It currently aims for the general reserve to be maintained at the 2021/22 figure of £2.4m, which is equivalent to 7 percent of the annual budget requirement. This reserve may be reduced to £2.2m by the end of 2026/27.

The service has earmarked a reserve of approximately £2.5m to support transformation projects and offset any budget gaps. This reserve is currently being used to fund dedicated project management resources.

The service makes good use of fleet and estate

Following our previous inspection, one of the areas for improvement was that the service should have a robust and comprehensive fleet strategy.

We were pleased with the progress made since then. The service has a fleet strategy, and it has also developed a new estate strategy. These strategies have clear links to its CRMP, and the service regularly reviews and evaluates them. Both strategies exploit opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness.

The service has a ten-year maintenance schedule to modernise and refurbish its estate. This includes improving facilities for female staff. The service also has plans to install electrical charging points, which will help the gradual replacement of the fleet with hybrid and electric vehicles.

The service has evaluated its buildings to make sure they meet its current and future needs. It has set aside a fund of £112,000 that can be used for any additional requirements or improvements that are outside the scope of the maintenance schedule. These include making its buildings more accessible to its staff and the public.

The service is taking steps to transform but needs to do more to improve efficiency

The service has a comprehensive ICT strategy that considers how changes in technology and future innovation may affect risk. It also seeks to exploit opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness presented by changes in technology. For example, the service has a digital, data and technology steering group. This group makes sure the ICT strategy aligns the needs for efficiency and productivity with those in the digital, data and technology strategy 2023–27. Also, at the time of our inspection, the service was introducing a new HFSV electronic system. However, the service still has other processes that are paper based.

The service is taking steps to make sure the workforce's time is as productive as possible. But it has limited capacity and capability to bring about sustainable future change. It has struggled to recruit staff who have the ICT and project management skills it needs. However, it is now using its transformational reserve to fund dedicated project management resources. And it plans to set up a new team for organisational transformation. We look forward to seeing improvements in how the service manages future change.

The service takes advantage of opportunities to secure external funding and generate income

The service actively considers and exploits opportunities for generating extra income. It generates a total of £726,000 annually from collaboration activities, such as:

- £35,000 from sharing a firefighting apprenticeship scheme with Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue Service;
- £135,000 from funding to support the management and provision of LRF;
- £12,000 from property sharing with the police, EEAST and St John's Ambulance; and
- £27,000 from equipment servicing for Essex and Northamptonshire fire and rescue services.

Promoting the right values and culture

Requires improvement

Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at promoting the right values and culture. This is in relation to the cause of concern given to the service, which states that it should make sure operational staff meet the minimum fitness requirements.

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.

Cause of concern

Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service can't assure itself that its operational members of staff meet the minimum fitness requirements to perform their roles.

Recommendation

Within 28 days, the service should provide an action plan that details how it intends to make sure all staff meet the minimum fitness requirements.

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

Main findings

Values and behaviours are established and culture continues to improve

The service continues to have well-defined values, which staff understand. Staff at all levels of the service demonstrate behaviours that reflect service values. Of those who responded to our staff survey, we found 97 percent (206 out of 213) were aware of the service's statement of values and 95 percent (196 out of 206) agreed that their colleagues consistently model and maintain the service's values.

We were also encouraged to see the new values being aligned with NFCC guidance and that they are being included in the appraisal process.

While most staff spoke positively of senior leaders, some staff told us that some senior leaders don't always act as positive role models or demonstrate the values or behaviours of the service. In our staff survey, 87 percent (180 out of 206) of staff agreed that their line manager consistently models and maintains the service's values. However, 44 percent (90 out of 206) of staff didn't agree that senior leaders consistently model and maintain the service's values.

Most staff told us they are proud to work for the service, and recognition for their work is improving with recent changes in leadership. However, some told us they would like to see senior leaders more often because they feel there isn't enough visibility. Staff also feel there is a lack of consideration about how unmanageable workloads affect the workforce. And they feel that there are too many pinch points in the service where work is continually pushed down from the top of the organisation. Some staff told us this results in a negative working culture.

However, we found that there was a positive challenge culture throughout the service. Staff told us they are confident and willing to challenge poor behaviours when they come across them.

There is good provision to support workforce well-being

The service continues to have well-understood and effective well-being policies in place, which are available to staff. A significant range of well-being services are available to support both physical and mental health. For example, the service offers:

- occupational health referrals;
- an employee assistance programme 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (for work and non-work-related matters); and
- physiotherapy.

There are good provisions to promote staff well-being. This is a clear priority for the service and is a focus in the weekly blue bulletins. (Blue bulletins are aimed at all staff and contain information such as news and updates.)

Most staff agree that they can access services to support their mental well-being. We found that 84 percent (178 out of 211) of staff who responded to our survey were confident the service would offer well-being services after a workplace incident.

The service has appropriate health and safety provision in place

The service continues to have effective and well-understood health and safety policies and procedures in place. In our staff survey, 93 percent (197 out of 211) of respondents agreed that they understand the policies and procedures 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. In our staff survey, 96 percent (203 out of 211) of respondents agreed that they are clear and support them in reporting all accidents, near misses and dangerous occurrences. However, we found that the service's health and safety investigations were often affected by staff absences. Also, the service's evidencing of workplace accident investigations could be more effective. A review of performance targets to make them more specific would help reflect health and safety activity more accurately.

The service monitors staff who have secondary employment or dual contracts. This makes sure they comply with the secondary employment policy and don't work excessive hours.

The service should make sure operational staff meet the minimum fitness requirements

We are concerned that the service can't assure itself that all members of operational staff can meet the minimum fitness levels required to perform the role of a firefighter. Firefighting is a physically demanding occupation, and it is essential that firefighters have sufficient levels of fitness to help them to carry out their tasks as safely and effectively as possible.

The service has a comprehensive fitness policy, which states firefighters are expected to complete an annual fitness test. The policy is aligned with the NFCC guidelines and standards.

The service provided fitness data that shows that, in 2022/23, 33 percent of firefighters had completed fitness testing. Home Office data shows that, in 2021/22, this was 68.6 percent and in 2020/21 this was 3.47 percent (during COVID-19).

The service told us that some firefighters may not have been tested in a two to three-year period. We found that there had been a vacancy for a service fitness adviser for some time. The role of the fitness adviser is to manage, co-ordinate, monitor and provide the fitness assessment programme as stated in the fitness policy.

The service recognises the need to reintroduce annual fitness testing for staff. We found it had prioritised return-to-work tests using station fitness trainers. However, it has yet to establish a plan to assure itself that operational employees are maintaining the standards required to perform their roles and to support them.

There is a clear process to manage absence

We found there are clear processes in place to manage absences for all staff, which describe a supportive process for staff health and well-being. There is clear guidance for managers, who are confident in using the process. We found that the service managed absences well and in accordance with policy.

Getting the right people with the right skills

Adequate

Bedfordshire 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 CRMPs. It should set out their current and future skills requirements and address capability gaps. This should be supplemented by a culture of continuous improvement, including appropriate learning and development throughout the service.

Areas for improvement

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

The service should assure itself that on-call firefighters are appropriately supported in their initial development.

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 would benefit from reviewing workforce plans

The service does some workforce planning and has a comprehensive workforce plan for wholetime staff. But it doesn't take full account of the skills and capabilities it needs to effectively carry out its CRMP in critical roles. We found that the service's planning could be improved to fully consider workforce skills and overcome any gaps in capability, especially in support roles.

The service should review succession plans to make sure it has the staff it needs

The service needs to do more to improve the way it considers its future needs and succession planning. Across workforce roles, the five-year change in staff was:

- support staff, 20.6 percent;
- firefighters (on-call and wholetime combined), 6.3 percent; and
- fire control staff, -12.5 percent.

We found there is no clear succession plan for support roles, and many specialist roles have vacancies for significant periods.

In 2021/22, more people joined the service (77 people) than left (60 people), and the proportion of leavers was lower than the national average (9.8 percent compared to 10.4 percent). However, the workforce had the perception that there was a high turnover of staff. In 2021/22, 35 on-call firefighters joined the service and 18 left. This is 21 more joiners than the previous year. Staff told us they have witnessed a lot of change recently, which negatively affects their workloads.

In our staff survey, 29 percent (61 out of 213) of respondents wanted to leave in the next 12 months or as soon as possible. And 41 percent (25 out of 61) of respondents said this was due to an unmanageable workload.

The service should review its succession planning to make sure that it has effective arrangements in place to manage staff turnover. It should also make sure staff have appropriate workloads. The results of not doing this would potentially affect the provision of its core service to the public.

The service considers protected characteristics and reasonable adjustments to support learning

The service has a learning and development policy that makes sure the learning needs of staff are considered. We found that the service carried out a training gap analysis for everyone. And as part of the joining instructions for courses, candidates are asked if they require any reasonable adjustments. We found some examples of the service supporting candidates who had self-declared as neurodiverse and required reasonable adjustments to support their learning needs.

Most staff told us that they can access the training they need to be effective in their roles and that it isn't just focused on operational skills. The service's training plans make sure it can maintain competence and capability effectively. For example, all management roles have a competency matrix that displays the skills required for the role, including training in equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and in health and safety, which is also reflected in all operational and support roles.

The service monitors staff competence by using PDR pro. Each quarter, this reports progress to senior management.

We found all the records of staff skills and safety-critical capabilities that we reviewed to be up to date, including those for incident command. Operational staff are trained and competent. This approach allows the service to identify gaps in workforce capabilities and resilience. It also means it can make sound and financially sustainable decisions about current and future needs.

We found the service makes sure that staff have completed training courses, although there was limited evidence of refresher training when considering technical skills for supervisory managers, like discipline and grievance training. The service has explored the option of using an external training provider for refresher training and is planning to resolve this in the next 12 months.

There is a positive culture of learning and development

The service promotes a culture of continuous improvement throughout the organisation, and it encourages staff to learn and develop. For example, staff told us they find their one-to-ones with managers useful as they allow them to request and access further development opportunities.

Most staff told us they can access a range of learning and development resources. These include e-learning modules, coaching and mentoring. This allows them to do their jobs effectively.

On-call firefighters require more support with their initial development

On-call firefighters told us that they are happy with the training provided by the service in responding to fires and other emergencies effectively.

We found that on-call firefighters were recording safety-critical training consistently and the service was able to display this on a competency dashboard. However, on-call firefighters told us that at times they struggle for time and capacity to complete all 52 modules on the training system.

Following recruitment, on-call firefighters are expected to complete an initial development portfolio. Staff told us that many on-call firefighters are still in initial development for up to three or, in some cases, five years. The service told us that it has set a different time frame for when it would expect an on-call firefighter to complete their development compared to that for a wholetime firefighter. The service told us that this is due to differences in contract. However, the service's development policy states that the same time frame is expected for both wholetime and on-call firefighters.

On-call firefighters told us that they have fewer opportunities for, and access to, assessment. This affects their pay and we found that wholetime firefighters received their full pay within shorter time frames. Firefighters told us that another consequence of the initial development time frames is the effect on the availability of their fire engines. This is due to the length of time it takes to qualify as a breathing apparatus team leader.

Managers told us that, in reality, on-call initial development portfolios had stopped due to staff vacancies and constant changes in managerial roles. Managers were also finding them difficult to keep on top of with current workloads.

The service should assure itself that on-call firefighters are appropriately supported in their initial development.

It is encouraging that the service has identified that on-call firefighters require more support. The on-call improvement project has recruited two watch commanders who support on-call training and development. The service told us that this should accelerate completion of all phases of development, including gaining skills and maintaining them. We look forward to seeing the outcome of this project.

Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity

Adequate

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

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

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure it has effective grievance procedures. It should identify and put in place ways to improve staff confidence in those procedures.

The service should have a consistent plan to promote positive action with under-represented groups and make sure staff understand the purpose and benefits of a diverse workforce.

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

Main findings

The service has improved its overall approach to equality impact assessments

In our last inspection, one of the areas for improvement was that the service should have robust processes in place to carry out equality impact assessments and review any actions agreed as a result.

We are pleased to report that this area for improvement has been addressed.
We found the service has sufficient evidence of equality impact assessments, which it calls ‘personal impact assessments’. They are stored on a central SharePoint site, which all staff can access. The records we reviewed were aligned with the NFCC framework and were available for projects, policies and community activity.
The service has appointed a new EDI manager. The manager has completed some quality sampling and audits of personal impact assessments and has given appropriate feedback to managers to improve standards.

The service has introduced more ways to seek staff feedback

The service has developed several ways to work with staff on issues and decisions that affect them, such as staff surveys, CRMP workshops and ICT customer satisfaction feedback. These include methods to build all-staff awareness of fairness and diversity as well as targeted initiatives to identify matters that affect different staff groups. It is pleasing to see the service has invested more in developing EDI networks and improving their influence. For example, a senior manager currently chairs the neurodiversity network to make sure its voice is heard at a corporate level.

The service has taken action to address matters raised by staff. For example, staff told the service that reasonable adjustments are taking a long time to implement.
In response, the neurodiversity network is helping the service identify delays in the ‘access to work’ process. This process enables the purchase of computer hardware and software for staff with disabilities.

The service should improve staff confidence in the grievance process

Representative bodies and staff associations reported that they would like better involvement from the service in grievance matters.

We found that staff and representative bodies were aware of the grievance policy but weren’t confident that grievances would be resolved, especially when dealing with EDI issues. When we conducted a review of grievances, we found that five formal grievances were recorded in 2021/22. A small number of grievances submitted in a service can indicate that staff aren’t confident using the grievance process. We noted also that the service doesn’t always meet the allocated time frame for dealing with a grievance.

The service should take steps to resolve this problem and increase staff confidence in using the grievance process.

Disciplinary processes are effective, but staff still need reassurance the service is taking action

Although the service has clear policies and procedures, staff have limited confidence in how well it can deal effectively with cases of bullying, harassment and discrimination as well as grievances and discipline. In 2021/22, the average time taken to complete a formal investigation (which the service calls a level 3 investigation) was 207 days, compared to 135 days in 2020/21.

From our staff survey, 83 percent (176 out of 213) of respondents agreed they are treated fairly at work. However, the survey also told us the following:

- 15 percent (32 out of 213) of staff have felt bullied or harassed at work in the last 12 months. 75 percent (24 out of 32) of respondents attributed the main source to someone more senior than themselves. Respondents thought the most common factors that the bullying or harassment was related to were physical appearance, gender, neurodivergence, age and performance at work.
- 14 percent (29 out of 213) of staff have felt discriminated against at work in the last 12 months. Respondents thought the most common factors that the discrimination was related to were gender and age.

Of those who said they felt bullied, harassed or discriminated against, the primary reason for non-reporting was that the respondent thought that nothing would happen.

The service has changed its approach and is taking robust steps to improve scrutiny of bullying, harassment and discrimination

It is promising that the service has recognised the issues described above and is taking seriously its responsibility for eliminating them. We found it was taking robust steps to improve scrutiny of bullying, harassment and discrimination cases.

The service has introduced improvements to make sure people are confident to come forward to report these types of unacceptable and unwarranted behaviour. It has introduced scrutiny at each level of investigation:

- An investigating commissioning manager will make sure that all these types of allegations are investigated as fully and completely as possible.
- The service has sought independent reviews of larger cases by a legal team. It has reviewed the feedback from these, which confirmed discipline cases are being handled appropriately.
- The service is promoting to staff an anonymous reporting tool to raise any incidence of bullying and harassment.

It is encouraging to see that the service is taking national reports seriously, such as the *Independent Culture Review of London Fire Brigade* and *Values and culture in fire and rescue services*. It has reviewed these reports and produced an action plan to address the findings or recommendations.

The service could do more to increase diversity at all levels of the workforce

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. We found evidence that the service evaluates its recruitment campaigns to understand if there are any barriers for under-represented groups so it can improve future application rates.

The service has acted positively to improve diversity. For example, in 2021 positive action activity began six months before the wholetime firefighter recruitment campaign opened. This included a 'register your interest' list before applying.

The service told us that:

- of the 332 applicants for wholetime roles, 182 (55 percent) were on the register your interest list before applying, 37 (20 percent) of those were from ethnic minority backgrounds and 24 (13 percent) were female;
- of the 332 applicants, 42 were White British or Irish females, 5 were females from ethnic minority backgrounds and 45 were males from ethnic minority backgrounds; and
- it hosted some engagement days called 'have a go', aimed at women.

However, despite the above actions, the percentage of staff who have self-declared as being female or from an ethnic minority background has stayed broadly the same.

During this inspection, some staff couldn't explain what positive action is or give examples of how it is being used to recruit and retain a more diverse workforce. We also found that positive action wasn't always practised. The service should make sure it has a consistent plan to promote positive action with under-represented groups and make sure staff understand the purpose and benefits of a diverse workforce.

The service knows it needs to do more to increase diversity at all levels in the workforce. There has been limited progress to improve ethnic and gender diversity.

The workforce needs to reflect the diversity of the community it serves

For the whole workforce, as at 31 March 2022:

- 23.6 percent were women, which is significantly above the England average of 18.6 percent;
- only 6.6 percent of wholetime firefighters and 10.7 percent of on-call firefighters were women, which is disappointing. The proportion of female firefighters increased slightly from 7.4 percent (32 people) in 2020/21 to 8 percent (35 people) in 2021/22;

- 9 percent were from an ethnic minority background compared to 38 percent of the local population. Bedfordshire is a very diverse area, but this isn't reflected in the service's workforce;
- 7.3 percent of firefights (31 people) were from an ethnic minority background, which remained the same compared to the previous year at 7.4 percent (31 people); and
- 77 people had joined the service in 2021/22. 12 percent of these joiners were from ethnic minority backgrounds.

The service could make better use of exit interviews to understand why staff leave the organisation and use them to learn from.

The service has a reasonable approach to EDI

The service has improved its approach to EDI. It makes sure it can support staff with protected characteristics and can offer the right services to its communities. For example, it has held road traffic collision events for disabled drivers.

We were pleased that the service collects some diversity data from the community and staff, although this could be more consistent and used more effectively. The service produces an annual report on equality data.

The service makes e-learning available to staff, covering equality in the workplace and the Equality Act 2010. We found that 73 percent of staff had completed an EDI training module.

Positively, we found that staff generally felt a sense of inclusion and belonging at work. There are staff networks in place that support staff and raise awareness of gender, sexuality and race. These also support staff with well-being, the menopause and retirement. The service encourages and supports female staff to attend national network events.

The service has reviewed its workplace facilities with respect to EDI

In our inspection, we found that, as part of the estates strategy, there has been an EDI assessment of all buildings. The property manager has worked with the EDI manager to prioritise this work. They have secured a £112,000 budget for EDI improvements in addition to improvements scheduled in the ten-year maintenance plan.

In our staff survey, we found 98 percent (207 out of 211) of respondents agreed that they have access to gender-appropriate workplace facilities.

Managing performance and developing leaders

Adequate

Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service is adequate 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.

Area for improvement

The service should ensure it has arrangements in place to identify, develop and support all high-potential staff 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 effectively manages individuals' performance

There is a good appraisal system in place, which covers the service's values, the NFCC's Core Code of Ethics for fire and rescue services and the NFCC's national leadership framework. Each individual must complete a formal annual appraisal between April and July.

The service told us that in 2021/22, they had an appraisal completion rate of 93 percent, which allows them to effectively develop and assess the individual performance of all staff. There are detailed outcomes and procedures to follow for poor performance, new starters and those developing in their roles.

During this inspection, we spoke to staff working in fire stations and other areas of the service. They told us that they have regular discussions with their managers and

that these are meaningful. They also told us that each staff member has individual goals and objectives and regular performance assessments. Most staff feel confident in the performance and development arrangements in place.

The service is improving its approach to fairness in promotion processes

The service has put considerable effort into developing its promotion and progression processes so that they are fair and all staff can understand them. The service uses a gateway process for promotion in operational roles. Operational staff told us this is a positive change. We found that all staff who passed the promotion gateway were entered into a talent pool. Some candidates can be selected from here to fill short-term resourcing gaps. The service supports each applicant with a training development activity plan. The service plans the frequency of the gateway process, using workforce planning activities and considering vacancies anticipated in the next 12 months.

The service manages selection processes consistently. It has introduced the role of assessment and selection co-ordinator to makes sure the promotion process holds up to scrutiny and that interviewers' training is up to date. All interviewers complete unconscious bias training. The assessment and selection co-ordinator is keeping good records of all the promotion processes for operational staff and providing assurance to the service that the processes are fair.

The service uses the external recruitment company VCA for its senior promotion processes to make sure there are impartiality and diversity in decision-making.

The service has effective succession-planning processes for operational staff, which allow it to effectively manage their career pathways, including roles needing specialist skills.

However, these processes aren't consistent with those for support roles, and the service finds it difficult to fill short or long-term vacancies in support roles.

Some staff told us they feel there is little incentive to apply for promotion and they are particularly concerned about the increased workloads of temporary management positions.

The service should do more to diversify leadership

We note that the service is recognising and developing some internal candidates that could progress to senior leadership roles.

The service needs to encourage applicants from diverse backgrounds into middle and senior-level positions. We found the service does advertise externally and invites all candidates to an awareness session. However, it tends to fill these positions internally, so it isn't making the most of opportunities to make the workforce more representative.

The service could do more to develop leadership and high-potential staff for support roles

In our last inspection, one of the areas for improvement was that the service should make sure it has arrangements to identify, develop and support all high-potential staff across the organisation.

In this inspection, we found that the selection, development and promotion processes focused primarily on operational staff. Therefore, this area for improvement will remain.

The service needs to improve the way it actively manages the career pathways of all staff, including those with specialist skills and those with potential for leadership roles. It has some talent management schemes, such as the gateway process, to develop leaders and high-potential staff. It also provides the option for candidates applying for promotion to indicate whether they want to participate in an accelerated promotion process. However, although these are consistently available for operational roles, they aren't available for support staff.

The service told us that it will be changing its appraisal for support staff. This will incorporate a talent grid and support career pathways. However, there is no promotion process for support staff, only operational staff. We look forward to seeing this work progress.

The service uses temporary promotions to fill vacancies

Since our last inspection, the average length of a temporary promotion has increased. As at 31 March 2022, the average length was 688 days, which was higher than the average for England. In the year ending 31 March 2022, 7.1 percent of the workforce (44 members of staff) were on temporary promotion. This could mean the service is providing good development opportunities, or it could mean it is struggling to fill roles permanently. The service should consider the effect on those staff filling temporary roles.

The service is adopting fire standards

It is encouraging to see that the service has a governance framework to understand what action is required to adopt the Fire Standards Board's fire standards. It has made good progress and, of the 14 standards released, it has reviewed 12. In December 2022, the service completed a gap analysis of the leading the service and the leading and developing people standards and planned their implementation.

The service has also reviewed its values and code of ethics against the Code of Ethics Fire Standard developed by the Fire Standards Board and the NFCC's Core Code of Ethics for fire and rescue services. It told us that it will have full compliance with the fire standards in 2023. We look forward to seeing this work progress.

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