

## **INTRODUCTION**

Fire and Rescue Authorities must provide annual assurance on financial, governance and operational matters and show how they have had due regard to the expectations set out in their Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) and the requirements included in the **Framework**.

Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Authority (BFRA) have a responsibility to publish an Annual Statement of Assurance which provides a report on the Service's performance in the previous year in relation to:

- Financial: How BFRA ensures that public money is properly accounted for, managed, audited and reported along with management of financial assets and the production of the Annual Statement of Accounts which is produced in line with accounting codes of practice.
- Governance: How BFRA ensures that it conducts its business lawfully and that public money is properly accounted for and managed economically, efficiently and effectively and that an Annual Governance Statement (AGS) is published.
- Operational: How BFRA operates within a clearly defined statutory framework.

National guidance on the content of Statements of Assurance published in May 2013 suggests that where Authorities have already set out relevant information that is clear, accessible and user friendly within existing documents, they may wish to include extracts or links to these documents within their Statement of Assurance.

This Statement includes extracts or links to key documents where relevant. This document sets out the approach taken to ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place in terms of governance and operational delivery. It is intended to provide transparent information about its financial, governance and operational affairs, and is subject to the normal scrutiny arrangements through the Audit and Standards Committee, the full Fire and Rescue Authority and by publication on the Service's website.

In summary this Statement of Assurance aims to provide information to the Communities, Government, Local Authorities and Partners in an easy and accessible way, so a valid assessment can be made of their local Fire and Rescue Authority's performance during 2022/23.

## **FINANCE**

BFRA places significant importance in ensuring that its financial management arrangements are in line with the expectations of a public body. As a public service the Authority is responsible for ensuring that public money is properly accounted for and spent in a way that provides value for money.

In addition to the statutory requirement to publish annual financial results, the government is committed to increasing transparency across local authorities. One of the steps in this process is for the publication online of information relating to spend items in excess of £500. In accordance with that requirement, the Authority is publishing monthly schedules of payments, which can be found on our [website](#).

## Statement of Accounts

The pre-audited Statement of Accounts for the year ending 31 March 2023 is a document prepared in accordance with CIPFA/LASAAC Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom, under International Financial Reporting Standards that summarises BFRA's transactions for the previous financial year detailing how the funding was used to provide a Fire and Rescue Service to the communities of Bedfordshire and includes:

- a) The Statement of Responsibilities for the Statement of Accounts which sets out the responsibilities of the FRA and the Treasurer to the FRA;
- b) The Annual Governance Statement (AGS);
- c) The Movement in Reserves Statement which summarises the FRA's spending against the council tax it raised, taking into account the use of reserves during the year;
- d) The Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement which summarises the income and expenditure of the FRA;
- e) The Balance Sheet which displays the financial position of the FRA as at 31 March 2023;
- f) The Cash Flow Statement which summarises the changes in the FRAs funds; and,
- g) The Pension Fund Account for the year together with the Net Assets Statement at the year end.

The Accounts are supported by a Statement of Accounting Policy and Core Financial Statements, and these are prepared by the Finance Team under the direction of the Assistant Chief Officer and Treasurer to the BFRA.

[Bedfordshire fire and rescue service budgets](#) are available via this link.

## **GOVERNANCE**

The Authority is responsible for maintaining a sound system of internal control that supports the achievement of its policies, aims and objectives whilst safeguarding public money and organisational assets. There is also a requirement to ensure that the Authority is administered prudently and economically and that resources are used efficiently and effectively and that sound arrangements are in place for the identification and management of risks.

The Authority's approach to governance is based on the seven core principles of good governance set out in the CIPFA / SOLACE Framework for Delivering Good Governance in Local Government (2016), which includes behaving with integrity, maintaining effective stakeholder engagement and ensuring transparency amongst others.

The responsibility for ensuring proper governance arrangements and controls rests with BFRA, who enable the effective exercise of the Authority's functions and the management of risk. The Governance Framework includes systems, processes, culture and values to enable BFRA to monitor the achievement of strategic objectives and consider whether the objectives have led to the delivery of appropriate, cost-effective services to the communities of Bedfordshire and stakeholders.

## Annual Governance Statement

The Authority is required to produce an “Annual Governance Statement” (AGS) which is published in July each year at the same time as the “Annual Statement of Accounts”. The Governance Statement is based on an ongoing process designed to identify and prioritise the risks to the achievement of the Authority’s policies, aims and objectives, to evaluate the likelihood of those risks being realised and the impact should they be realised, and to manage them efficiently, effectively, and economically.

It explains how our service manages its governance and internal control arrangements and measures the effectiveness of those arrangements.

The AGS also explains how BFRA has complied with the Code and meets the requirements of the Accounts and Audit (England) Regulations 2015 in relation to the publication of an Annual Governance Statement. BFRA’s financial arrangements conform to the governance requirements of the CIPFA – Statement on the Role of the Chief Financial Officer in Local Government. The Treasurer to the BFRA reports in this role directly to the Chief Fire Officer whilst directly supporting the FRA as Section 151 Officer.

## Internal Audit

The role of internal audit is to review the internal control framework that governs the operations of the BFRA and, in so doing, provide an independent opinion to both Management and Members of the BFRA on the robustness of the Authority’s internal control environment. Each year an [Internal Audit Plan](#) is produced and developed by the auditors, in conjunction with the Assistant Chief Officer/Treasurer to the BFRA and is based on a risk assessment of all the services/systems of the Authority. Members and Service Managers are directly involved in the development of the plan, and it is subject to input and review by the Corporate Management Team (CMT), prior to being approved by the Audit and Standards Committee. In summary, the plan identifies the audits to be completed each year, including core fundamental systems and other operational systems.

The appointed Internal Auditors also work with both Essex and Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Services (FRS) as part of a joint contract and where possible, are able to audit on areas of commonality and shared service areas across all three FRAs. The work of the audit team complies fully with the requirements of CIPFA’s Code of Practice for Internal Audit in Local Government in the UK.

The Internal Auditors provide an annual opinion on the internal control framework and operate to standards set out in the Code of Practice for Internal Audit in Local Government in the UK.

For the 12 months ended 31 March 2023, the Head of Internal Audit’s opinion for the Authority was as follows:

*“The organisation has an adequate and effective framework for risk management, governance and internal control.*

*However, our work has identified further enhancements to the framework of risk management, governance and internal control to ensure that it remains adequate and effective.”*

## Performance

BFRA has a robust Performance Management Framework in place for securing continuous improvement in its services and where the quality of service to the communities can be measured using local performance indicators.

An integral part of the performance framework includes the setting of organisational key performance indicators. These are agreed and monitored continuously using a data toolkit and reported and scrutinized quarterly by senior managers of the Service with performance being reported through the Corporate Management Team, the meetings of the Executive Committee and the Audit & Standards Committee, and to full FRA Meetings.

## External Audit

The accounts are audited by independent external auditors (Ernest & Young LLP) who in addition to auditing the accounts, also provide assurance that the Authority has the correct arrangements in place for securing economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in its use of resources. The full external audit work programme and the risk-based approach are explained in The Annual Audit Plan.

As a result of the external audit work in 2021/22, there were no significant matters arising that required the Authority to implement an action for improvement. The Annual Audit Report summarises the key findings for the 2021/22 year, as well as their opinion on the Authority's accounts and the value for money.,

The 2022/23 statement of accounts are yet to be externally audited; it is anticipated that this will take place in 2024. The draft accounts were presented to the Audit & Standards Committee in July 2023.

## Democratic Services

BFRA is made up of twelve elected members who are appointed in proportion to the number of local government electors in each constituent Authority area. The Authority therefore has Members from the three Local Authorities of Bedford Borough Council, Central Bedfordshire Council and Luton Borough Council comprising:

- 3 Members from Bedford Borough Council;
- 5 Members from Central Bedfordshire Council; and
- 4 Members from Luton Borough Council.

BFRA has adopted a constitution which sets out how the Authority operates, how decisions are made and the procedures which are followed to ensure these are efficient, transparent, and accountable to local people and stakeholders.

All areas of the Service are covered to ensure that the Service is functioning efficiently and effectively. This is achieved by providing checks and challenges,

monitoring performance, and approving associated policy and activity. The Executive and Audit and Standards Committees make recommendations on matters within their terms of reference to the Authority according to their area of concern.

The Chairs of these Committees report any recommendations arising from these meetings to the meeting of the full FRA. Reporting will also include on-going policy and decision making, which is facilitated by a clear framework of delegation set out in the Authority's Constitution, including details of delegated authorities to officers.

All reports are reviewed for legal, human resource, financial and risk considerations prior to being presented to Members of the BFRA for formal decision-making. This, together with an appropriate level of delegation to both the Authority Executive and Senior Managers, enables prompt decision making.

In 2022/23 the BFRA appointed each member of the Executive Committee with a special responsibility for the following portfolios:

- Prevention and protection: Councillor Choudry
- Response and resilience: Councillor Chatterley
- Workforce and organisational development: Councillor Waheed
- Assets and collaboration: Councillor McVicar
- Digital and data: Councillor Headley

The above reflects the position during 2022/23. At the FRA's annual general meeting in June 2023, the Members of the Authority changed.

The Local Government Association commenced an independent review of governance which comprised of discussions with Members and Officers in September 2022, as well as considering recommendations from a desktop review of governance documents conducted by the Monitoring Officer at Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Fire Authority. On 31 October 2022, the Authority approved an Action Plan proposed by Officers which included a review of constitutional aspects of the Members' Handbook. Constitutional amendments were adopted by the Authority on 30 March 2023.

#### Data Transparency and Accountability

In preparing this Statement of Assurance, the Authority has considered the principles of transparency, promoting openness and accountability through reporting on local decision making, public spending and democratic processes.

All relevant information is published on the Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service [website](#) in line with the Local Government Transparency Code 2015, including information on how the Authority has spent its public money, how the Authority makes decisions and what policies and procedures the Authority is governed by, thus demonstrating the Authority's commitment to transparency and accountability.

#### HMICFRS Inspections

In April 2023 His Majesties inspectorate of police and fire and rescue services (HMICFRS) will return to carry out another scheduled inspection of Bedfordshire Fire

and Rescue Service. This will report on how Bedfordshire fire and rescue service performs in the areas of effectiveness, efficiency and people.

In the report, published December 2021, it was stated that the service has improved its efficiency and how it treats its staff. The report praised the sound financial management and scrutiny within the service, as well as robust monitoring and targets for response and good processes in place to make sure that staff are trained and competent.

Compliments were paid to the use of technology, the new service values as endorsed by staff members, increasing staff diversity and the clear and concise robust arrangements in place to respond to large-scale, multi-agency incidents. It was noted that looking forward, the service could do more to assure itself of the quality and content of its risk-based inspection programme.

It was stated that during the pandemic, the service had innovated and used new technology to help other organisations. It had adapted to enable staff to work from home and its firefighters were helping local businesses to comply with COVID-19 restrictions, with particular praise added to the fact that the service took the lead in setting up and managing mass vaccination centres.

### **Identify and assess risks in our local area**

The service regularly assesses the risks within Bedfordshire and allocates resources accordingly to prevention, protection, and response activities. Modelling of risks and communities has resulted in plans, specific to each station and their risk needs, which are regularly monitored and updated to measure progress against them. The risks identified are used to generate the [Community Risk Management Plan \(CRMP\)](#). This sets out the services aims over the coming year and its commitment to continuous improvement of the services it provides.

### **Prevention**

The Service utilises a risk-based approach to prevention that enables us to target individuals or households who are at the greatest risk. To enhance our risk-based approach, recent developments have focused on our use of data to risk profile our communities, to enable us to prioritise our prevention services to those that need them most. These developments include:

Introduction of social and demographic dataset modelling tools that ensure our prevention activities are data-led, leading to our resources being utilised efficiently to target those most at risk.

Implementation of digitalised Home Fire Safety Visit form and associated information system to enable the capture of comprehensive risk data and support interventions to address the health, behaviour, and social needs of the beneficiary.

The Service continues to maximise its reach and impact, by collaborating with partners to deliver educational risk reduction initiatives. Road Safety, Water Safety,

and Youth Intervention events are now evaluated through attendee behavioural change surveys and feedback questionnaires. Results are utilised to measure impact and inform our future approach.

In addition to behavioural change surveys, we also report on and evaluate the effectiveness, efficiency, and impact of our prevention activities by creating regular reports specific to each Prevention function.

The service trains all staff in safeguarding ranging from level 1 to level 3, this assists the service in identifying and acting on instances of abuse or neglect both within the service and in the wider community.

The Fire Standards Board Oversees and maintains professional standards of fire & rescue services in England. BFRS has carried out a gap analysis and produced a subsequent action plan to ensure we align with the Prevention Fire Standard. Aligning to this standard assures that we will take appropriate action to mitigate the risk to the communities of Bedfordshire.

## **Protection**

Our Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 2023-27 states our 9 protection priorities and details our approach to ensure we are successful in achieving them. The following sets out how we have due regard for our commitments to these priorities.

BFRS has a statutory duty to enforce the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (FSO). Since the Grenfell Tower tragedy in 2017, there has been a commencement of further legislation including the Fire Safety Act 2021 and the Fire Safety (England) Regulations 2022. We are investing in developing a highly skilled Protection workforce to ensure we are equipped to deal with these changes. We have begun a program of training aimed at upskilling other members of our staff to undertake fire safety-related roles, this will also assist in succession planning for dedicated fire safety roles. We recognised the importance of training our fire safety regulators so that they are qualified by the national competency framework and to make them effective for the future.

To ensure that building owners and occupiers are aware of their responsibilities under the new legislation we are raising awareness through regular communication and engagement. The recent requirement (23<sup>rd</sup> January 2023) under the Fire Safety (England) Regulations has meant that the responsible person (RP) of high-rise residential buildings must submit a report to their local FRS of defects relating to firefighting lifts and other key firefighting facilities such as dry risers and smoke ventilation systems. BFRS provides a portal to facilitate this. It is detailed and advertised through direct contact, social media, and GOV.UK to assist RPs to comply with the legislation.

BFRS uses qualified regulators to proactively audit premises where the FSO applies. We use a risk-based approach utilising a comprehensive database and our detailed Community Risk Analysis to prioritise premises where people are most at risk. To

ensure we are as effective and efficient as possible we use non-specialist operational crews to visit lower-risk premises to undertake basic fire safety checks.

Through our proactive audit programme, investigating building complaints, after fire inspections, and working collaboratively with other agencies including the three local authorities; where appropriate BFRS enforces and prosecutes responsible persons that contravene the FSO. To ensure we take a fair and proportionate approach we have added an Enforcement Manager to the Protection Team.

BFRS receives fire safety design proposals as part of the consultation process from various external parties. These are often complex and require the correct knowledge, skill, and experience to be able to respond to the consultation. We have a memorandum of understanding with Essex Fire and Rescue Service to ensure that we always have access to and resilience in people of this skill level. This agreement provides access to complex computer modelling and quality assurance to ensure the safety of the building.

The Fire Standards Board Oversees and maintains professional standards of fire & rescue services in England. BFRS has carried out a gap analysis and produced a subsequent action plan to ensure we align with the Protection Fire Standard. Aligning to this standard assures that we will make the built environment safe for the people of Bedfordshire.

## **Response**

The service continues to plan its response on a risk-based model, Recent feedback from HMICFRS noted:

*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.*

To respond to this the service is reviewing the way it delivers emergency cover with the available resources. This has led to trialling a fire appliance responding from a different location within Luton and a "roaming" pump that can be moved from location to location bridging gaps within emergency cover on a risk-based approach. The data that results from these trials will be used to drive proposals for improvements in the future. Already the data that has been gathered has been used to identify where improvements in station turnout times can be achieved.

The availability of on-call appliances at key times of day continues to impede the service's ability to respond to the high standards it has set for itself. A project to deliver improvements in the way the service recruits, trains, and retains on-call firefighters has been established to address this. This looks to work with on-call firefighters, to establish what the issues are, and work collaboratively to mitigate them.



Using a risk modelling approach, the service is looking to understand where the response issues are, as Bedfordshire continues to grow and develop, ensuring it has the right resources, in the right places to meet the needs of new industries and communities.

The exceptionally hot summer in 2022 saw a significant increase in emergency calls and the service is exploring ways that it can respond flexibly in the future, to face emerging climate change issues, such as outdoor fires and flash flooding incidents.

The service maintains an operational assurance department to foster reflective learning from the incidents we attend, this function aims to identify learning and embed future improvements. The operational assurance department is also our single point of contact for operational learning from other services across the UK.

As a service we maintain our own control room which hosts the first fully cloud-based mobilising system in the country, they will work nationally with other control rooms to ensure that both our local and national fire control needs are met.

### **Collaboration**

The service has in place agreements with surrounding services to be able to draw upon their resources in times of need. This is reciprocated with BFRS assets responding out of county when called for. This incident data is regularly reviewed to understand the impacts that it has on the service.

The service now hosts the Bedfordshire Local Resilience Forum (BLRF). This places us at the heart of preparing for emergencies within the county and drives further our links with partner agencies and responders. The service facilitates a minimum of 10 exercises with our local partners annually, these exercises assist in ensuring that incident commanders at varying levels in the organisation can effectively respond to emergencies with our partners.

The service has now established its arrangements to provide command and control to BLRF which see our staff facilitate joint working during emergencies (or potential emergencies). The services communications staff will also work in conjunction with our local partners ensuring that information regarding emergencies is co-ordinated where required.

The service makes a water rescue team available as a national asset to respond to flooding incidents nationwide. The service also hosts a mass decontamination unit on behalf of UK National Resilience. The service regularly assures itself of its ability to work with national partners and recently hosted an exercise to confirm its ability to establish a multi-agency strategic holding area.

The service maintains a specialist response team, trained and equipped to support the rescue of casualties in the event of a marauding terrorist attack.

The service has built strong bonds with partner responders and now supports the East of England ambulance service trust (EEAST) daily, with co-responding, gaining entry, or bariatric patient support, through the agreements in place with them. The service hosts a falls team working jointly with Bedfordshire community health service

aimed at alleviating the need for ambulance attendance for falls. The service also is regularly looking to build on opportunities to work more closely together in the future and has facilitated this by introducing the leading beyond boundaries course to its education program which sees our managers undertake joint training aimed at creating and fostering collaboration with health partners.

### **Investing in Our People**

Through effective workforce planning, the Service will ensure it continues to have an efficient workforce with the right skills in the right place at the right time. The workforce planning outcomes drive our recruitment, talent identification, development, and promotion opportunities.

We recognise that health and wellbeing are not an optional extra. Supporting our staff to be physically and mentally healthy not only forms part of our legal responsibilities, and makes good organisational sense, but it is also the right thing to do for our people who are working to protect our communities.

We offer a range of services to support all employees to maintain healthy lifestyles. These include access to a comprehensive Occupational Health Service, multi-faith chaplaincy Employee Assistance Programme, The Fire Fighters Charity, specialist mental health, additional mental health provision delivered across the 3 local authority areas of the County, a targeted health scheme that can fast track diagnostics for physical conditions as well as access to physiotherapy for muscular-skeletal conditions. Our Workforce Support Group brings together employees with a range of neuro-diverse conditions who have worked collaboratively to improve our support to our neuro-diverse colleagues.

We have an active Wellbeing Steering Group with representatives from across the Service who play a vital part in our wellbeing approach. This includes members of our Trauma Risk Incident Management Team who have received 'peer support' training to assist their colleagues who are at risk of suffering from trauma given the variety of traumatic incidents our operational colleagues are exposed to. We have a well-established policy on fitness that requires operational firefighters to undergo annual fitness testing. Fitness testing results are monitored by the Corporate Management Team and Fire Authority.

### **Equality diversity and inclusion**

Under the Equality Act 2010, public authorities have a legal obligation to comply with the general equality duty. This incorporates nine protected characteristics age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief, sex, and sexual orientation. To meet our statutory obligations, when exercising our functions, we must aim to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation, and other conduct prohibited by the Act;
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not;
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not. In addition to the general duty, all public sector bodies are

required to meet specific duties that are incorporated into the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) which requires us to:

- Publish diversity information annually to demonstrate our compliance with the general duty;
- Prepare and publish specific and measurable equality objectives.

We are committed to promoting equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in both the service we deliver to the community and the employment of our staff.

We want our workforce to be more representative of the diverse communities we serve within the County. We are passionate in our belief that a diverse workforce will enable us to deliver a better service and make Bedfordshire even safer. We have a series of wide-ranging positive action initiatives, aiming to attract candidates from diverse groups to join and stay with our Service. We believe this will better equip us to meet the specific needs of the communities we serve. Collecting and analysing equality data is an important way of developing our understanding of our employees and communities. We produce an annual equality report that shows how we comply with the general equality duty as well as publishing our gender pay gap, both of which are available on our website.

Under the Equality Act 2010, all public sector organisations must consider the impact of each of their policy decisions on the 9 'protected characteristic' groups. To help us do this, we undertake People Impact Assessments (PIAs). The purpose of a PIA is to ensure our services are effective, efficient, and fair in the work they carry out. PIAs help us to make sure that, as far as possible, any negative consequences are understood and mitigated and opportunities for promoting fairness and respect are maximised. We have reviewed our approach to PIAs and ensure that the impact of proposed changes, policies, new equipment, and initiatives are all assessed for their impact across the 9 protected characteristics.

Planning of front-facing community events by staff will be underpinned by activity management plans, these plans will all have an impact assessment to ensure that from inception the specific needs of the community are considered.

As part of our People Strategy, we will continue to focus on promoting equality, diversity, and inclusion and seek further ways to understand our communities' requirements, as we strive to foster a positive, inclusive, and diverse culture.

## **Values and Culture**

The independent culture review of the London Fire Brigade report and the subsequent spotlight report by HMICFRS into the values and culture across the sector noted widespread discrimination, harassment, and bullying and received extensive coverage in the media. We want to assure the communities of Bedfordshire that an action plan was developed to address any gaps against the recommendations that were not already committed to within Our People Strategy 2023-2027.

We regularly review our Grievance, Disciplinary, and Bullying & Harassment policies to ensure that they reflect organisational learning and the very latest best practice.

Our cultural action plan contains a range of activities to improve our culture and the way we treat one another this is being achieved in several ways including further training, using structured feedback as well as the creation of an independent confidential reporting line to report incidents.

Bedfordshire has a set of values that were developed in collaboration with the workforce, these values align with the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) Core Code of Ethics and our Service professional behaviours. Employee behaviour is assessed against the Service Values, Core Code of Ethics, and our professional behaviours on an annual basis as part of the appraisal process.

### **Fitness**

The service recognises the importance of fitness in its operational staff and there is access to fitness equipment at all our stations. All operational staff are required to perform an annual fitness test, with help and support available for those who struggle with this.