

Fire & Rescue Service 2021/22

Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service



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About this inspection

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

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

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

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

What inspection judgments mean

Our categories of graded judgment are:

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








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





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







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

If there are serious, critical or systemic failings of policy, practice or performance of the fire and rescue service, then consideration will be given to a graded judgment of inadequate.

Overview

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

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

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

HM Inspector's summary

It was a pleasure to revisit Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service, and I am grateful for the positive and constructive way that the service engaged with our inspection.

I am pleased with the performance of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service in keeping people safe and secure from fires and other risks, although it needs to improve in some areas to give a consistently good service. For example, it should make the most of opportunities to learn from operational incidents through its debrief process and make sure information is being effectively shared with control.

We were pleased to see that the service has made progress since our 2019 inspection. The following areas that were identified for improvement have been fully addressed by the service:

- improving access to up-to-date site-specific risk information for its firefighters;
- evaluation of the service's prevention activity;
- allocating additional resources to the protection team;
- ensuring staff have appropriate uniform; and
- ensuring that there is a consistent approach to incident command throughout the service.

These are the findings from our assessments of the service over the past year that I consider most important:

- The service understands risk and demand in its area. It has completed a thorough risk analysis and developed a new community risk management plan (CRMP) (which is what it calls its [integrated risk management plan \(IRMP\)](#)) that supports it to mitigate risk effectively using its prevention, protection, and response teams. This makes sure it can keep the communities of Oxfordshire safe from fire and other risks.
- The service needs to improve the way it carries out the training and assessment of risk-critical breathing apparatus skills. It also needs to improve communication with control, so that control knows which fire engines have breathing apparatus-trained staff on board. To manage this shortfall in capability, the service [mobilises](#) an additional fire engine to [primary fires](#) in on-call station areas. This delays an effective response.
- The service continues to have a very positive culture and actively promotes equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). Staff were enthusiastic about the changes in the service, including the introduction of new technologies. Support for health and wellbeing is excellent and the service works hard to listen to staff, understand their suggestions and try new approaches.

Overall, Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service is providing a good service to the public. It is effective in its prevention and protection activity. It has improved some of its processes to better understand its operational response, but it knows it needs to improve some of its training and information-sharing processes.

It is well supported by Oxfordshire County Council, is financially stable and is looking for ways to improve its productivity and value for money. Its people are positive and enjoy working for the service. It has plans to increase the diversity of its workforce and improve its leadership and development pathways. We look forward to returning to the service for its future inspection.



Matt Parr

HM Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Service in numbers



Response

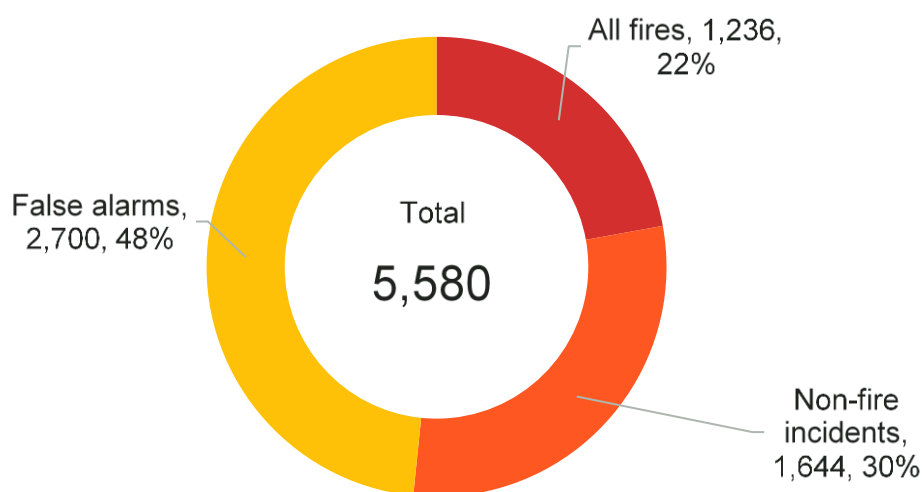
	Oxfordshire	England
Incidents attended per 1,000 population Year ending 30 June 2021	8.01	9.36
Home fire safety checks carried out by fire and rescue service per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2021	3.55	4.47
Fire safety audits per 100 known premises Year ending 31 March 2021	1.14	1.70
Average availability of pumps Year ending 31 March 2021	78.3%	86.4%



Cost

Firefighter cost per person Year ending 31 March 2021	£24.23	£23.73
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Incidents attended in the year to 30 June 2021



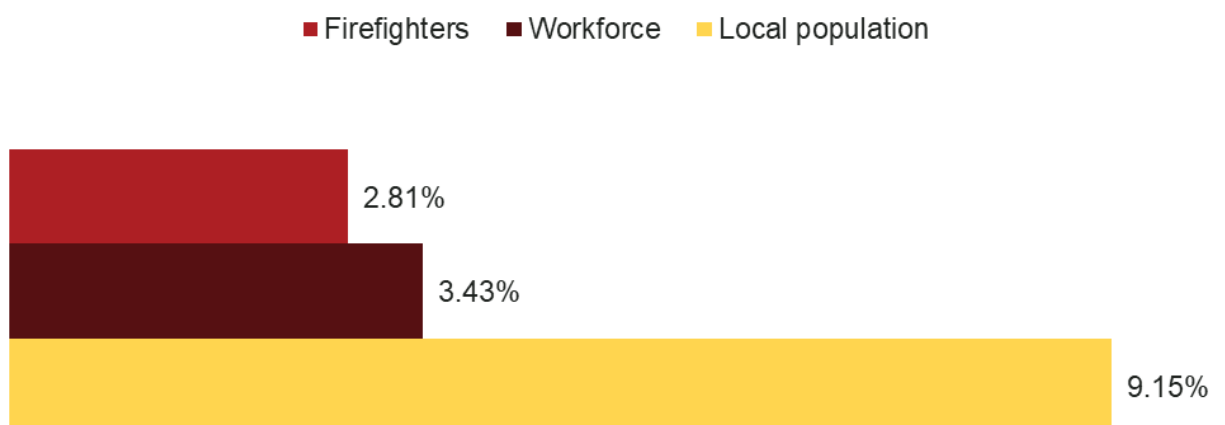


Five-year change in total workforce 2016 to 2021	8.13%	-1.60%
Number of firefighters per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2021	0.85	0.62
Percentage of firefighters who are wholetime Year ending 31 March 2021	39.6%	64.4%

Percentage of population, firefighters and workforce who are female as at 31 March 2021



Percentage of population, firefighters and workforce who are from ethnic minority backgrounds as at 31 March 2021



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

Effectiveness



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



Good

Summary

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

Since our last inspection in 2019, the service has addressed several of the areas for improvement that we highlighted. These include the access firefighters have to site-specific risk information (SSRI), consistency in its use of the [Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles \(JESIP\)](#) and its command of incidents, and its evaluation of its prevention activity. It has a well-resourced protection team, which focuses on the buildings that are at greatest risk and takes proportionate enforcement action. But there is still more to do.

For example, the service needs to make sure that it can respond immediately and effectively to incidents. It should make the most of the opportunity to learn and improve through its operational debriefs. It should also make sure that all firefighters understand what their role would be when responding to a possible terrorist incident.

The service knows it needs to improve access to risk information so that control can better support incident commanders when responding to an emergency, and that it needs to do more to reduce unwanted fire signals.

It is encouraging that the service has done a thorough analysis of the risks in its area and used this to develop a new community risk management plan. It works well with a wide range of organisations and neighbouring fire services to reduce risk to the public.

Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies



Good (2019: Requires improvement)

Oxfordshire 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. Arrangements should be put in place through the service's prevention, 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.

The service is good at identifying a range of risks

After a thorough [IRMP](#) planning process, the service has assessed an appropriate range of risks and threats. When assessing risk, it considered relevant information collected from a broad range of internal and external sources and data sets.

For example, the service analysed incident data and considered information about its communities, including age, ethnicity, and whether they live in poverty. It also reviewed what effect growth and development and other county council services' priorities in the area might have on foreseeable risks.

When appropriate, the service has consulted with and had constructive talks with communities and other groups, to both understand the risk and explain how it intends to mitigate it. These groups include parish, district and town councils, local councillors, Thames Valley Police, South Central Ambulance Service, other fire and rescue services, the Royal Life Saving Society, and the service's own staff and their representative bodies. The service does this face to face, and by using social media, websites, newspaper inserts and existing community networks.

The service has an effective IRMP

After assessing relevant risks, the service has recorded its findings in an easily understood IRMP, which it calls a community risk management plan (CRMP). The plan describes how prevention, protection and response activity is to be effectively resourced to mitigate or reduce the risks and threats the community faces, both now and in the future.

To make sure the service's plans and aims stay current, it annually reviews new and emerging risks. It will also annually update the public about its progress and achievements. The service should make sure the way it monitors its progress is quickly adjusted to reflect the changes it has made in the new CRMP.

The service has improved its approach to gathering, maintaining, and sharing risk information

The service routinely collects and updates the information it has about the people and places it has identified as being at greatest risk. This includes high-rise buildings, care homes, hospitals, waterways, and some commercial and domestic premises. A central risk information team quality assures and monitors SSRI for non-domestic premises. Operational staff routinely review and practice tactical plans associated with these sites.

In our 2019 inspection we reported that SSRI was kept in both paper and electronic formats. Some of the records were out of date and this was an area for the service to improve. We are pleased that the service made this a priority. We found that firefighters now have good access to up-to-date information on [mobile data terminals](#) and tablets.

However, the SSRI collected isn't distributed throughout the service and isn't readily available or understood by all staff. The service needs to do more to make sure staff in prevention, protection and response roles can access the information they need. For example, control staff didn't have access to this information on their [mobilising](#) system. This means the service can't effectively identify, reduce and mitigate risk.

The service is good at building understanding of risk from operational activity

The service records and communicates risk information effectively. It also routinely updates risk assessments and uses feedback from local and national operational activity to inform its planning assumptions.

For example, its operational assurance team meet quarterly with several other teams in the service, such as the training and development, health and safety, and driver training teams. They review operational learning identified in the service's monitoring and auditing process. As a result of these meetings, the service realised that water-based incidents had an increased risk to staff and the public, and that it needed to increase the frequency of its water safety training courses.

The service has good risk information following the Grenfell Tower Inquiry

During this round of inspections, we sampled how each fire and rescue service has responded to the recommendations and learning from Phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower fire inquiry.

Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service has responded positively and proactively to learning from this tragedy. At the time of our inspection, the service had already assessed the risk of each high-rise building in its service area by the end of 2021.

It has carried out a fire safety audit and passed the relevant risk information to its protection and response teams about buildings identified as high risk, and all high-rise buildings that have cladding similar to that installed on Grenfell Tower.

Preventing fires and other risks



Good (2019: Good)

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

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

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

The service has linked its prevention plan to its new CRMP

The service's prevention plan is clearly linked to the risks identified in its CRMP. Its prevention objectives prioritise those most at risk from fire and other emergencies. They also address the wider council priorities of thriving people and thriving communities. The plan was developed with input from the service's prevention teams and is monitored.

The service works well with other relevant organisations on prevention and it passes on relevant information when needed. For example, it has a strong relationship with adult social care and public health services, and shares information about [vulnerable people](#) with them to reduce risk.

Information is used to adjust planning assumptions and direct activity between the service's prevention, protection and response functions. We saw that plans for individual fire stations prioritised safe and well activity, school education, and raising awareness through local campaigns.

However, the service needs to make sure it is also visiting those people most at risk from fire based on local needs, the services data and intelligence, and that it isn't solely reliant on referrals to target its [safe and well visits](#).

The prevention team has reduced in size since the last inspection. The service should satisfy itself that it can continue to carry out its plans with fewer staff.

The service adapted its prevention activity during the pandemic

We considered how the service had adapted its prevention work during our COVID-19 specific inspection in September and October 2020. At that time, we found it had adapted its public prevention work appropriately. Since then, we are encouraged to find that the service has resumed its safe and well visits to support and protect those vulnerable to fire. The service has also evaluated some of its activities and is making better use of technology as a result. For example, it is using video calls to communicate with and educate the public.

The service is good at targeting activity through referrals

Prevention activity is clearly prioritised using a risk-based approach towards people most at risk from fire and other emergencies. For example, it has effective arrangements to receive referrals for safe and well visits, and to refer people to other organisations where needed. The service had few referrals waiting to be visited at the time of the inspection.

We were also encouraged to see that the service carries out other practical interventions, where specialist staff fit devices including misting units. It has also started working with Southern Gas Networks to install carbon monoxide alarms.

Staff have the right training to do safe and well checks

Staff told us they have the right skills and confidence to make safe and well visits. These checks cover an appropriate range of hazards that can put vulnerable people at greater risk from fire and other emergencies. The service gives specialist staff monthly feedback sessions on their professional development. Operational staff have the initial training to complete safe and well home visits.

The service is good at responding to safeguarding concerns

Staff we interviewed told us about occasions when they had identified [safeguarding](#) problems. They told us they feel confident and trained to act appropriately and promptly. The service makes many referrals to social care services.

The service works well with other organisations

The service works with a wide range of other organisations, such as adult and children's social care services, local housing providers, health care organisations and charities to prevent fires and other emergencies. We found good evidence that it routinely refers people at greatest risk to these and other organisations which may be better able to meet their needs.

Arrangements are in place for the service to receive referrals from others through an online webform. Referrals come from local GPs, social workers, South Central Ambulance Service, Thames Valley Police and trading standards. The service acts properly on the referrals it receives from these organisations, visiting those people at highest risk within 48 hours of receiving the referral.

The service is good at organising road safety activities

The service routinely exchanges information with other public sector organisations about people and groups at greatest risk. It uses the information to challenge planning assumptions and target prevention activity. For example, the service is responsible for organising road safety activity on behalf of the council. It targets this activity at schools in the most deprived areas of Oxfordshire.

The service uses the annual National Highways reports on those killed or seriously injured on the road to adapt its campaigns, as 80 to 90 percent of incidents on their roads are linked to the causes mentioned in the reports.

The service is good at responding to fire-setting behaviour

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

When appropriate, it routinely shares information with other organisations, such as schools, children and adult social care services, and Thames Valley Police to support the prosecution of arsonists. The number of deliberate fires that the service responds to is below the England average, and the work it does to tackle this concern is proportionate.

The service has made improvements and conducted an evaluation of its activities

The service now has good evaluation tools in place. This was an area for improvement identified in our inspection in 2019. These tools measure how effective its work is so that it knows what works, and that its communities get prevention activity that meets their needs.

For example, the CRMP data analysis and the service's evaluation of its safe and well programme, its Junior Citizens scheme and review of the national Fire Cadets scheme has helped it to identify new ways to educate the public. It has also helped it to target particular areas of the county with digital content. We look forward to seeing the effect these changes have on the service and the communities it serves.

The service's prevention activities also take into account feedback from the public, from other organisations, and from other parts of the service. For example, it made a phone survey of a sample of the residents who had received safe and well visits. The participants were happy with the service they had received, and some could recall the information they had been given to reduce fire risk in the home.

Protecting the public through fire regulation



Good (2019: Good)

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

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

Area for improvement

The service should make sure it effectively addresses the burden of false alarms (termed unwanted fire signals).

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

The service has an effective protection plan that is aligned to its CRMP

The service's protection plan is clearly linked to the risks it has identified in its CRMP. This means the service can focus its RBIP on what it identifies as high-risk businesses and take appropriate enforcement action. It can also work with businesses to raise their awareness of complying with fire safety regulations, reducing risk in commercial premises.

Staff throughout the service are involved in this activity, with information effectively exchanged between departments as needed. For example, information from audits targeting commercial premises is collected by operational staff and specialist protection team members. This information helps staff to identify new risks, which are then added to the service's RBIP. The service can then take enforcement action, if appropriate.

Information is also used to adjust planning assumptions and focus activity between the service's protection, prevention and response teams. This means resources are properly aligned to risk.

The service has recently developed evaluation tools which it could use more to measure the effectiveness of its protection activity. The service should use these tools to make sure all of its communities get equal access to the protection services that meet their needs.

The service adapted its protection activity during the pandemic

We considered how the service had adapted its protection activity during our COVID-19 specific inspection in September and October 2020. At that time, we found it had adapted its protection work well. Since then, we are encouraged to find that the service has resumed activity as normal, prioritising high-risk premises and using appropriate measures to support those vulnerable to COVID-19. It is meeting all its targets.

The service has aligned its protection activity to address the highest-risk buildings

The service's RBIP focuses on the service's highest-risk buildings. The service has continued to review its approach. A comprehensive scoring matrix involving a combination of data, fire severity ratings and local intelligence is used to decide whether a premise will be included, and its rate of reinspection. The service currently identifies its highest-risk premises as those including high-rise residential dwellings, care homes, and some hotels or bed and breakfasts. These buildings are reinspected annually.

The audits we reviewed were completed in the timescales the service has set itself. At the end of March 2021, the service recorded 54 percent of the buildings it audited as unsatisfactory. This is a significantly higher rate than the England average, and a further indication that the service is targeting the most appropriate premises.

The service has successfully audited all high-rise buildings

We are encouraged to see that audits have been carried out at all high-rise buildings the service has identified as having cladding similar to the cladding installed on Grenfell Tower. All the buildings have now had this cladding removed and have been fitted with additional fire safety measures in consultation with the service. Information gathered during these audits is made available to response teams, enabling them to respond more effectively in an emergency.

The quality of audits completed by the service is good

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

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

The service does do some quality assurance of its protection activity. Managers shadow staff who are completing audits twice a year, but this isn't recorded. The service should make sure it completes effective quality assurance of its protection activity, so it can be satisfied that all staff continue to carry out audits to an appropriate standard.

The service uses its enforcement powers appropriately

The service consistently uses a wide range of enforcement powers and, when appropriate, prosecutes those who don't comply with fire safety regulations. The service was considering several potential prosecutions at the time of the inspection. Operational crews are notified of enforcement activity in their station area, to maintain a good understanding of risk.

In the year to 31 March 2021, the service issued:

- 96 informal notifications;
- 9 enforcement notices;
- 3 prohibition notices; and
- undertook 4 prosecutions for offences.

It completed 7 prosecutions of offences in the 5 years from 2016 to 2021.

The service resources its protection team according to risk

The service has enough qualified protection staff to meet the requirements of the service's RBIP. This was an area for improvement identified in our inspection in 2019. We are encouraged to see that the service resources its protection team to a level that takes account of the anticipated high number of leavers. This means the service can carry out the full range of audit and enforcement activity needed, both now and in the future.

Staff get the right training and work to appropriate accreditation.

The service is working well with other organisations

The service works closely with other enforcement agencies to regulate fire safety and routinely exchanges risk information with them. It works well with the judicial services and Trading Standards. These support the service to conduct proportionate levels of prosecution activity. The service has also recently developed [primary authority schemes](#) with housing organisations to support many buildings in which the fire safety order applies. It has a 24-hour technical support line in collaboration with the other Thames Valley fire services.

The service's response to building consultations is good

The service responds to all building consultations on time, so consistently meets its statutory responsibility to comment on fire safety arrangements at new and altered buildings.

The service could improve how it promotes fire safety with businesses

The service acknowledges it could do more to engage with local businesses and other organisations to promote compliance with fire safety legislation. It has recently developed a role which will support its CRMP priority to make sure businesses understand how they can comply with regulations. It has joined with the other Thames Valley fire services to present online seminars to educate care homes.

The service could do more to reduce unwanted fire signals

The service has made limited progress in addressing its response to false alarms, which is higher than the national average, and which we identified as an area for improvement in 2019. As such, the area for improvement remains.

In the year to 31 March 2021, the service attended 74 percent of the automatic fire alarm calls (AFAs) that it received. This is higher than the national rate of 63 percent, and is reflected in the high proportion of incidents the service attended being false alarms. This means that fire engines may be unavailable to respond to genuine incidents because they are attending false alarms. It also creates a risk to the public if more fire engines travel at high speed on roads to respond to these incidents. The service has made some progress, with the percentage of AFAs the service attends falling from 88 percent 3 years previously. We look forward to seeing further improvements the service intends to make.

Responding to fires and other emergencies



Requires improvement (2019: Good)

Oxfordshire 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 area.

Areas for improvement

- The service should ensure it has effective systems in place to reliably understand the operational capabilities of resources available to respond to incidents.
- The service should assure itself that it has procedures in place to record and learn from important operational decisions made at incidents, and that these procedures are well-understood by staff.
- The service should make sure that [fire control](#) has direct access to relevant and up-to-date risk information.

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

The service's response plan is aligned to risks identified in the CRMP

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

The service is not achieving 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. It aims to arrive at emergencies:

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

The service reported that in 2020/21 it hadn't achieved its targets. It had reached 76.7 percent of emergencies within 11 minutes and 88.6 percent of emergencies within 14 minutes.

Home Office data shows that in the year to 31 March 2021, the service's average response time to [primary fires](#) was 10 minutes and 45 seconds, which is slower than the average time for predominantly rural services of 10 minutes and 28 seconds.

We are disappointed to find that the service hasn't fully resolved the problem of control knowing whether there are enough breathing-apparatus-qualified staff on board its on-call fire engines. The service is mobilising another wholetime fire engine to manage this issue, but this may have to attend the incident from much further away, taking longer than is preferable to arrive. We are concerned that this is worsening the effectiveness of the service's immediate response and the time taken to resolve emergency incidents.

Also, the service has, in some station areas, been flexible in its expectations for on-call attendance. Previously, [on-call staff](#) needed to be within five minutes travel of the station. This has been increased to seven minutes; this may also influence its response time.

Availability of the service's on-call fire engines could be improved

To support its response plan, the service sets itself a challenging target of having all its fire engines available on 100 percent of occasions. The service doesn't always meet this standard. It has seen an improvement from an average of 72.5 percent in 2019/20 to 78.3 percent in 2020/21. This improvement may, in part, be due to COVID-19, as on-call staff were available for more hours.

Incident command knowledge, understanding and application is good

The service has trained incident commanders who are assessed regularly and properly. Each commander is assessed every two years and does quarterly training exercises. New incident commanders are well supported by a mentor to help develop these skills and the service has good incident support tools. This helps the service to safely, assertively, and effectively manage the whole range of incidents that it could face, from small and routine ones to complex multi-agency incidents.

As part of our inspection, we interviewed incident commanders from across the service. The incident commanders we interviewed were familiar with assessing risk, making decisions and recording information at incidents in line with [national operational guidance](#), as well as the JESIP.

However, we found some inconsistency in operational staff's understanding and use of [operational discretion](#). The service should make sure staff are familiar with the principles of operational discretion.

The service is developing systems to handle multiple fire survival guidance calls

The control room staff we interviewed are confident they could give fire survival guidance to many callers simultaneously. This was identified as learning for fire services after the Grenfell Tower fire. The service has plans to introduce a way of monitoring multiple fire survival calls between control and staff attending the incident. The service should make sure this will be the most effective approach for both incident commanders and staff in control.

Control has good systems in place to exchange real-time risk information with incident commanders, other responding organisations and other supporting fire and rescue services. Maintaining good situational awareness helps the service to communicate effectively with the public, giving them accurate and tailored advice.

The service has improved access to up-to-date risk information

We sampled a range of risk information records on the service's mobile systems, including what is in place for firefighters responding to incidents at high-risk, high-rise buildings and what information is held by fire control. Staff had been trained in the use of computer tablets and in the development and use of SSRI since our last inspection.

The information we reviewed was up to date and detailed. It could be easily accessed and understood by staff. Encouragingly, it had been completed with input from the service's protection and response teams when appropriate.

However, we were disappointed to find that SSRI wasn't available to control staff. This means they can't use this information to support incident commanders responding to an emergency. The service has a plan to improve this availability and should make this change as a matter of urgency.

The service is not getting the most from its operational debrief process

As part of the inspection, we reviewed a range of emergency incidents and training events. These included [hot debriefs](#) at small incidents, structured debriefs for large and multi-agency incidents, debriefs at fires where there was a fatality or serious injury, and debriefs at incidents where operational discretion was used.

While the service has made some progress and improved the debrief process, the following area for improvement identified in 2019 remains. We found that the service doesn't always complete a structured debrief according to its own policy. Some staff were unaware of the structured debrief policy. They were also unaware of learning from a structured debrief process that had recently been shared on the service's intranet.

The service's system to record learning from a structured debrief is complex, and it isn't always clear what follow up action has been taken to improve service for the public. As a result, the service can't be certain that learning and development is acted on after an incident.

The service follows national operational guidance when it responds to incidents

We are pleased to see the service routinely follows its policies to assure itself, through monitoring, that staff command incidents in line with operational guidance. Internal risk information is updated with the information received through its continual audit process.

We are also encouraged to see the service is contributing towards, and acting on, learning from other fire and rescue services or operational learning gathered from other emergency service organisations. This includes attending regional operational assurance meetings to identify good ways of working in other services and sharing learning from incidents such as those involving lithium-ion batteries.

The service keeps the public well informed

The service has good systems in place to inform the public about ongoing incidents and help keep them safe during and after incidents. This includes all stations having a social media account and templated text and images to give instant updates about ongoing incidents. The county council communications team support the service during larger and multi-agency incidents.

Responding to major and multi-agency incidents



Good (2019: Good)

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

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

Area for improvement

The service should make sure it is well-prepared to form part of a multi-agency response to a terrorist incident, and its procedures for responding are understood by all staff and are well tested.

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

The service is well-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 CRMP.

It is also familiar with the significant risks that could be faced by neighbouring fire and rescue services that it might reasonably be asked to respond to in an emergency. Firefighters have access to risk information from neighbouring services up to 10 kilometres across borders through their mobile data terminals and tablets.

Staff are generally well-prepared to respond to major and multi-agency incidents

We reviewed the arrangements the service has in place to respond to different major incidents, including wide-area flooding, high-rise incidents and incidents at high-risk sites.

The service has good arrangements in place, which are well-understood by staff. Staff learn about the arrangements through the service's online training. The service also arranges local exercises with other blue light emergency services to test the arrangements for different incident types.

All staff should be prepared to respond to a terrorist incident

Most of the firefighters we spoke to didn't know what they would be expected to do in the event of a marauding terrorist attack.

The service needs to be sure all its staff are prepared to respond safely and effectively to a terrorist incident. It needs to make sure learning from exercises is used to improve its plans.

The service works well with other fire services

The service supports other fire and rescue services responding to emergency incidents. It shares a control room with the other Thames Valley fire services. This means that the nearest fire engine to an incident is mobilised first, and the three services often jointly respond to incidents across their borders, using their aligned equipment and fire engines. It is intraoperable with these services and can form part of a multi-agency response. Respondents to the staff survey agreed that the service works well with its neighbouring services.

The service has successfully deployed to other services. For example, it sent its high-volume fire engine to support the response to the flooding in London during July 2021.

Staff take part in cross-border exercising

The service has a cross-border exercise plan with neighbouring fire and rescue services so that they can work together effectively to keep the public safe. The plan includes the risks of major events at which the service could foreseeably provide support or request assistance from neighbouring services.

We were encouraged to see that feedback from these exercises is used to inform risk information and service plans. Recent exercises have been completed with Buckinghamshire and Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Services. The service carried out fewer exercises during the pandemic.

The service has improved knowledge and understanding of JESIP

The service provided us with strong evidence that it had improved its understanding of JESIP since our last inspection, and that it consistently follows these principles. The incident commanders we interviewed had been trained in and were familiar with the principles.

The service arranges initial familiarisation training for all incident commanders, and additional training and annual exercises for firefighters with more experience. Quarterly and monthly learning sessions give managers the opportunity to understand new practices and to learn from local, regional and national events.

The service works well with other organisations

The service has good arrangements in place to respond to emergencies with other partners that make up the Thames Valley [Local Resilience Forum](#). These arrangements include the rapid sharing of relevant risk information through control and planned joint operational exercises.

The service takes part in regular training events with other members of the local resilience forum and uses the learning to develop planning assumptions about responding to major and multi-agency incidents. The service has shared information about exercises at high-rise buildings with other organisations, including South Central Ambulance Service, [hazardous area response teams](#) and Thames Valley Police. The service is a valued partner and continues to lead on chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosive and hazardous materials threats.

National operational learning is prioritised in the service

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

Efficiency



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



Good

Summary

An efficient fire and rescue service will manage its budget and use its resources properly and appropriately. It will align its resources to the risks and priorities identified in its [integrated risk management plan](#). It should try to achieve value for money and keep costs down without compromising public safety. It should make the best possible use of its resources to achieve better results for the public. Plans should be based on robust and realistic assumptions about income and costs. Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service's overall efficiency is good.

Oxfordshire County Council still considers the service to be a high priority and supports it in its medium and longer-term financial planning. Funding is stable and the service has made reasonable savings to improve service to the public. It knows it still has buildings within its estate which need to be improved.

Where possible, the service continues to work with other organisations to procure equipment to make sure the Thames Valley's response to emergency incidents is consistent. But the service could use what it learns from this to improve its approach to working with other emergency services and to make sure it has the most effective possible arrangements with Thames Valley [Fire Control](#), which is the control room for all of the Thames Valley fire services.

The service has addressed the area for improvement to prevent data loss or corruption that we highlighted in our 2019 inspection and has introduced new databases for recording prevention and protection information.

The service has improved its access to IT and systems. Staff have access to laptops and mobile tablets to support more flexible working arrangements.

Making best use of resources



Good (2019: Good)

Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service is good at making best use of its resources.

Fire and rescue services should manage their resources properly and appropriately, aligning them with the services' risks and statutory responsibilities. Services should make best possible use of resources to achieve the best results for the public.

The service's budget for 2020/21 is £23.2m. This is a 1.7 percent increase on the previous financial year.

Areas for improvement

- The service should have effective measures in place to assure itself that its workforce is productive and that their time is used as efficiently and effectively as possible to meet the priorities in the CRMP.
- The service should make sure it continually and effectively monitors, reviews and evaluates the benefits and outcomes of all its collaboration activity.

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

The service's financial plans support its objectives

The service is part of Oxfordshire County Council's Communities Services Directorate. Its financial and workforce plans, including allocating staff to prevention, protection, and response, continue to reflect and are consistent with the risks and priorities identified in the CRMP.

The service's protection team is well resourced, and the financial plans make sure that the number of qualified staff available for this important function will remain stable. The service's response to its CRMP consultation shows it plans to use its operational staff more in its local prevention and protection activities.

Plans are built on sound scenarios. They help make sure the service is sustainable and are underpinned by financial controls that reduce the risk of misusing public money. The county council continues to support the service in its medium and longer-term financial planning. It has set aside funding to cover any possible future financial increases, including for potential pay rises of up to 2.5 percent and inflation of contracts by up to 4 percent.

The service is improving productivity and ways of working

We are pleased to see that the service's arrangements for managing organisational performance clearly link resource use to the CRMP and service's most important and long-term aims.

An annual review of the risks that the service faces, as well as regular departmental performance reviews, and performance management meetings which are attended by members of the senior management team, make sure the service is achieving expected targets. They also support it to increase productivity. Station and department plans align to the new CRMP. Staff were aware of their station or department's recent performance figures.

The service had to adapt its working practices because of the pandemic, and these are still part of its day-to-day activity. They include flexible working from home arrangements, combined with hot-desking for managers and support staff where possible. The service has embraced technological advances, giving staff equipment to work from home. It has trained all staff in the use of new laptops, including the use of video calls and mobile working devices.

However, at the time of the inspection, the service's arrangements for managing individual performance were yet to be fully introduced, and didn't yet clearly link to the CRMP and the service's most important aims. Systems and processes can be complex and don't make it easy for the service to make sure that staff are being as productive as they can be at work.

The service also uses a large amount of overtime to increase the availability of its on-call fire engines and to make additional training courses available to staff through its training department. The service should consider whether its current arrangements are appropriate. And it should consider whether it fully understands costs, benefits, and risks of using such high levels of overtime.

Collaboration continues to be a priority for the service

We are pleased to see the service meets its statutory duty to collaborate, and routinely considers opportunities to collaborate with other emergency responders. The service led the Oxfordshire County Council's response to the Afghan repatriation crisis and supported South Central Ambulance Service with emergency response drivers throughout the pandemic.

Collaborative work is aligned to the priorities in the service's CRMP. The service is due to buy breathing apparatus jointly with the Thames Valley services in 2022/23. It continues to review its fleet and to buy new fire engines through a joint Thames Valley procurement contract. This contract supports the service's work with other Thames Valley fire services when responding across the service's borders.

We are satisfied that the service monitors, reviews and evaluates the benefits and results of most of its collaborations. But its reviews and evaluations could be more consistently used to learn from or to reassess earlier decisions.

The service shares Thames Valley Fire Control with the two other Thames Valley services, and in emergencies this approach continues to [mobilise](#) resources effectively across all three services. However, there are missed opportunities for more aligned approaches in response to incidents, as well as more effective sharing of information. Oxfordshire FRS could also offer further support to Thames Valley Fire Control when control has a staffing shortage.

Continuity arrangements are robust

We are encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since the last inspection when we noted that the prevention and protection databases were at risk of data loss or corruption. The service has installed new secure systems.

The service has good continuity arrangements in place for areas where threats and risks are considered high. These threats and risks are regularly reviewed and tested so that staff are aware of the arrangements and their associated responsibilities. The service reviewed its procedures due to the pandemic. It has a rigorous plan if staffing levels drop significantly. It will exercise this in anticipation of widespread flooding preventing [on-call staff](#) reaching its stations.

The service shows sound financial management

There are regular reviews to consider all the service's expenditure, including its non-pay costs. And this scrutiny makes sure the service gets value for money. For example, an external review of the service notes that it manages costs well and has the scope to improve its efficiency through its staff and estate.

The service has made savings and efficiencies, which have caused minimal disruption to its operational performance and the service it provides to the public. The service reviewed its roving fire engine, which was intended to be deployed across the county to fill any gaps during daytime hours. By doing this, it made efficiency savings of £90,000, which it will continue to save year on year. Budget managers complete mid-year reviews to predict underspend and to identify areas to make further reasonable in-year savings.

The service is taking steps to make sure important areas, including estates, fleet, and procurement, are well placed to achieve efficiency gains through sound financial management and best working practices. The service's fleet is monitored, and any under-use identified, meaning vehicles can be relocated to make better use of them.

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



Good (2019: Good)

Oxfordshire 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.

Area for improvement

The service needs to assure itself that it is maximising opportunities to improve workforce productivity and develop future capacity through use of innovation, including the use of technologies.

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

The service is improving value for money

As part of the Communities Services Directorate within Oxfordshire County Council, the service has a sound understanding of future financial challenges. It plans to mitigate its main or significant financial risks. For example, it makes the most of the council tax precept to support the funding of the service. It can also show a balanced budget over the medium term.

The underpinning assumptions are relatively robust, realistic, and prudent, and take account of the wider external environment and some scenario planning for future spending reductions. These include assumptions for increases in pay, inflation and funding changes. These continue to be subject to informed challenges by the council.

We are pleased to see that the service has identified savings and investment opportunities to improve the service to the public or generate further savings. It has worked with an external company and other fire and rescue services to identify where it can improve value for money. Oxfordshire County Council expects the service to make modest year-on-year savings. It has a track record of making savings and avoiding residual budget gaps. It also has plans to be able to make savings of £395,000 by 2027.

The service has clear arrangements for the use of reserves

[Reserves](#) are held by Oxfordshire County Council. There is a robust process for the service to access reserves if they are needed.

The service has ambitious plans for its fleet and estates

The service and Oxfordshire County Council are aware that the service's estate is still in need of improvements. The current estate plan will come to an end in 2022 and the service is working closely with the council to consider future opportunities for change. Without new capital investment the service is unable to make the improvements required.

The service's fleet is regularly monitored and reviewed for efficiency. The service is ambitious in its plans to make the fleet more ecologically friendly and is trialling the use of hydrogen, electric and biofuel vehicles. The service actively considers future changes to fleet and estates. It is exploring ways to incorporate other blue light organisations, as well as potential changes to its risk and response model.

The service is using technology to improve efficiency

We are encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since the last inspection. The development of its prevention and protection software has reduced the risk of data loss or corruption. Staff can now input directly to systems via mobile tablets, which has improved efficiency.

The service considers how changes in technology and future innovation may affect risk. It is trialling a new approach to attract and encourage the recruitment of on-call staff where it offers its fire stations as a space for primary employment. This could increase the numbers of available appliances and reduce response times. We look forward to seeing the effect these changes have on the service and the communities it serves.

However, we found some of the service's IT systems and processes to be complex which has, at times, resulted in duplication of effort by staff. The service has to make a bid to the county council for funding to change its IT systems. But it has missed opportunities for service departments to make joint bids to integrate their systems. The service should look to exploit all opportunities presented by changes in technology to improve efficiency and effectiveness throughout its teams.

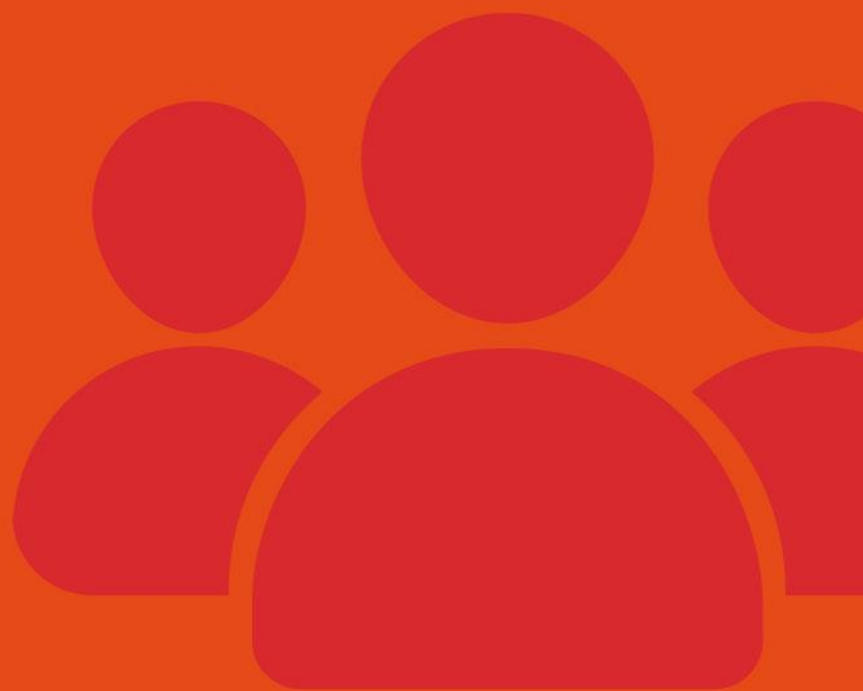
The service has put in place the capacity and capability needed to achieve long-term change, and it routinely seeks opportunities to work with others to improve efficiency and give better services in the future.

The service recently commissioned external companies to help review its response model and leadership succession plans. This will allow the service to adapt and respond to future changes in risk with the necessary skills, knowledge, and capability. It has adapted its recruitment profiles to include skills such as using social media to support its work in the community.

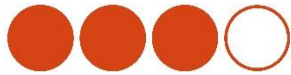
The service takes advantage of opportunities to secure external funding

Where appropriate, Oxfordshire FRS has secured external funding to invest in improvements to the service provided to the public. This includes securing £200,000 of funding to run road safety schemes throughout the county on behalf of the council and supplying fire safety training for other county council departments on a cost-recovery basis, and only when it has the capacity to do this.

People



How well does the service look after its people?



Good

Summary

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

The service continues to have a very positive working culture. Staff feel valued and listened to. The behaviours it expects and the values it promotes are understood and displayed by nearly all staff.

The service still considers mental health and staff wellbeing to be a priority, and it tailors this to meet individual needs. It has effective and well-understood health and safety policies and procedures in place and promotes them to all staff. However, it could improve the way it monitors the working hours of those on dual contracts and how it manages staff absence, to make sure these are consistent.

The service promotes a positive learning culture, and has effective processes to record and monitor operational skills and competency. However, it should improve its provision of breathing apparatus training, and make sure staff are trained and assessed appropriately.

Staff networks drive EDI activity in the service. The service's recruitment campaigns aim to increase the diversity of the workforce, although this approach hasn't resulted in a significant change.

In our last inspection in 2019, we identified lack of appropriate uniforms as an area for improvement. The service has made good progress, providing staff with appropriate uniform.

However, the processes for managing staff performance and development aren't consistently applied. And although the service has developed its processes for recruitment, promotion and progression, it needs to do more to improve opportunities for non-operational staff and to make sure that promotion processes are fair.

Promoting the right values and culture



Good (2019: Outstanding)

Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service is good at promoting the right values and culture.

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

Areas for improvement

- The service should monitor secondary contracts to make sure working hours are not exceeded.
- The service should make sure it has effective absence/attendance monitoring procedures in place to ensure consistency across the service.

Innovative practice

The service has good provisions in place to promote staff wellbeing.

This includes 'real talk, real people' sessions which are open to all staff to take part in and have covered a range of topics including the menopause, post-traumatic stress disorder and mental health concerns. Open and honest discussions about such topics, support staff to identify when they or the public experience these issues and know what they can do to help.

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

The service has a positive culture, and promotes positive behaviours and values

The service continues to have well-defined values that are understood by staff. In our staff survey, 94.8 percent (117 of 123) of respondents said they were aware of the service's values. We saw behaviours that reflected this shown by staff in stations across the service. Staff described putting the community at the heart of what they do, and all have a positive view of the service. Work has been carried out to show how the service's values align to the new national [Core Code of Ethics](#).

Senior leaders act as role models, with 94.8 percent (117 of 123) of respondents to our staff survey agreeing or tending to agree that senior managers consistently model the service's values. Staff also described being well supported by managers. They said they have a visible, approachable senior management team, and feel confident to raise concerns.

However, there were a few occasions when staff felt issues had not always been dealt with. They also feel that some middle managers don't always display the service's values. The service should make sure a consistent approach is taken by all managers.

There is a positive working culture throughout the service, with staff empowered and willing to challenge poor behaviours when they encounter them. Staff described situations when they had challenged inappropriate language or behaviours and felt well supported by the service. They described an open culture in which they are encouraged to challenge decisions and make innovative suggestions for change. For example, a new [on-call forum](#) has resulted in changes to training courses to better suit the needs of the [on-call staff](#) group.

Staff's mental and physical health is well supported

The service continues to have well-understood and effective wellbeing policies in place that are available to staff. A significant range of wellbeing support is available to support both physical and mental health. For example, the service has an occupational health team, a confidential employee assistance programme, mental health first aiders, and promotes use of the [Fire Fighters Charity](#).

After [critical incidents](#), staff are given an immediate debrief. They described the caring approach taken by the service positively. The service considers staff wellbeing in its policies and procedures. For example, the dignity and harassment policy states that when harassment is disclosed the welfare of all parties involved should be considered. This includes the person who disclosed, the person alleged of doing the harassing, and the wider team.

There are good provisions in place to promote staff wellbeing. This includes a new mental health and wellbeing group which was set up to make sure the service is reviewing and updating its wellbeing offer. The group has introduced 'real talk, real people' sessions which all staff can take part in. It has covered a range of topics including the menopause, post-traumatic stress disorder and mental health concerns. The sessions are led by a member of staff and sometimes include a guest speaker.

Most staff reported they understand and have confidence in the wellbeing support processes available. A survey conducted by the service showed that managers handled welfare concerns during COVID-19 well. Of those who responded to our staff survey, 96.7 percent (119 of 123) of respondents reported that they can access support services for their mental health, and 95.9 percent (118 of 123) said they felt confident that the service would give them support following an incident.

Where staff had discussed their health and wellbeing with their line manager, they often reported this being a useful conversation. But 22.7 percent (28 of 123) of staff responding to our staff survey said they had either never spoken to their manager about their health and wellbeing, or had done this less than once in a year.

The service should make sure all line managers take a consistent approach to these conversations.

The health and safety culture within the service is positive

The service continues to have effective and well-understood health and safety policies and procedures in place. Staff conduct thorough safety critical checks of equipment and routinely report accidents and [near misses](#). The service has a new accident investigation system which has helped it to find and investigate a problem with breathing apparatus. It worked with the manufacturer to resolve this.

The service has identified those staff who might be at risk when working alone and has given them a tracker on their mobile devices. Firefighters continue to take annual fitness tests and are supported to maintain a good standard of fitness.

The service's policies and procedures are readily available and effectively promoted to all staff. The service makes sure staff are trained in health and safety principles, and in the completion of risk assessments. It has a quality assurance process for both.

Both staff and representative bodies have confidence in the service's approach to health and safety. Of those who responded to the staff survey, 94.3 percent (116 of 123) said that they feel their personal safety and welfare is taken seriously at work. The representative body survey results agreed with this statement.

However, the service doesn't actively monitor staff who have secondary employment or dual contracts. It should make sure that staff follow the secondary employment policy and don't work excessive hours.

Station managers are responsible for monitoring working hours locally and there were inconsistencies in the approaches to this, so some staff don't know if they are complying with the working time regulations and taking enough time to rest.

Absence isn't consistently monitored within the service

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

The service has an absence policy, but it isn't always widely understood by staff or managers. In the files we reviewed, we saw some inconsistent decisions made. We were told this was because of lack of clear guidance. Staff didn't always follow policy, for example, there were inconsistent approaches to making decisions about when hearings may or may not take place.

The service has several systems in place to record absence. Short-term absence is managed locally by station and department managers. But in the current system there is no simple way to monitor how much cumulative time off staff have taken. This means staff who should be on performance improvement plans are not always being identified.

Overall, the service has seen a slight increase in long-term staff absences over the past 12 months. Some of these were COVID-19-related absences.

Getting the right people with the right skills



Requires improvement (2019: Good)

Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement 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 [integrated risk management plans](#), sets out their current and future skills requirements and addresses capability gaps. They should supplement this with a culture of continuous improvement that includes appropriate learning and development throughout the service.

Areas for improvement

- The service should make sure it has the capacity to ensure staff are trained and assessed promptly in safety-critical skills, such as breathing apparatus.
- The service should assure itself that all staff are appropriately trained for their role, especially where specialist skills are required to implement the CRMP.

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

The service has a good process to monitor and plan its workforce requirements

The FRS has good workforce planning in place. Workforce and succession planning is subject to consistent scrutiny in the form of regular meetings to discuss requirements. An establishment group made up of senior managers meets monthly to review the service's workforce profile and to plan for and anticipate changes, such as upcoming retirements. This makes sure staff skills and capabilities align with what is needed to effectively deliver the CRMP.

The service has a good process to monitor operational skills and capabilities

Operational staff told us that they could access the training they need to be effective in their role. The service's training plans make sure staff can maintain competence and capability effectively. For example, all operational staff can use the maintenance of competency system to access current and understand future training opportunities.

The service plans to monitor staff competence over the next 8 years using a new 37-module programme and a 4-year cycle of training courses, aligned to [national operational guidance](#). These are stored, monitored, and updated on a centrally maintained database. We heard that, after some initial issues, staff are now happy with this new system. The expectation is for on-call staff to meet almost the same level of competency as [wholetime firefighters](#), which can be difficult given the short training time attended by this staff group.

The service regularly updates its understanding of staff's skills and risk-critical safety capabilities through the performance monitoring board and the establishment group. Regular training team meetings also let managers know if any skills are out of line with service expectations. Local managers can easily review staff competence and plan how to meet training needs through station-based training and exercises.

The service's breathing apparatus training provision needs to improve

Although, the service has good monitoring processes for its workforce skills, it has gaps in its workforce capabilities and resilience. It is aware that there are a number of new on-call staff waiting to complete their assessment for breathing apparatus. Increased on-call recruitment, reduced numbers of staff able to attend a course during the pandemic, and changes in staffing in the training department who deliver and assess staff competency have contributed to this.

The pressures caused by staff waiting to attend breathing apparatus courses and assessments have resulted in the service having to run courses outside of its normal policy. As a matter of urgency, the service should consider innovative ways to make sure all its on-call staff can complete this risk-critical training without long delays.

The service promotes a positive learning and improvement culture

A culture of continuous improvements is promoted throughout the service and staff are encouraged to learn and develop. For example, staff must complete management and leadership courses as they progress in the service. Protection team staff complete appropriate qualifications for their work, and staff in the prevention team have monthly continuing professional development sessions.

All staff have regular refresher training in topics including [safeguarding](#), health and safety, and EDI. Staff are also trained to use new IT, such as laptops.

We are pleased to see that the service has a range of resources in place. These include:

- online e-learning packages;
- face-to-face training delivery from internal staff or external specialists;
- video and PowerPoint content; and
- practical training courses both on and off site.

Some staff told us they can access this range of learning and development resources easily through the central 'maintenance of competence' system, annual training application processes, and the Fire Service College. This allows them to do their job effectively.

However, some staff require specialist training and this isn't always easy to access. Staff, especially those in support roles, have to complete a training request form and may not be successful in the process. In our staff survey, 25.2 percent (31 of 123) of respondents said they didn't have the same development opportunities as others in the service.

Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity



Good (2019: Good)

Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service is good at ensuring fairness and promoting diversity.

Creating a more representative workforce will provide huge benefits for fire and rescue services. This includes greater access to talent and different ways of thinking, and improved understanding of and engagement with their local communities. Each service should make sure equality, diversity and inclusion are firmly understood and demonstrated throughout the organisation. 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 taken is meaningful.

Innovative practice

EDI is a priority for the service.

The service establishes a positive approach to EDI, through several staff networks and an equality and inclusion working group. These groups drive a range of different activities in the service and are led by senior leaders. Staff are confident to address inappropriate language and behaviour and feel confident that the service will act on matters raised with the most appropriate and open approach.

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

The service is good at encouraging and acting on staff feedback, and promotes a culture of positive challenge

The service has developed several ways to engage with staff on issues and decisions that affect them. This includes methods to build all-staff awareness of fairness and diversity, as well as targeted engagement to identify matters that affect different staff groups. In our staff survey, 82.1 percent (101 of 123) of respondents agreed or tended to agree that they felt able to challenge ideas without detriment as to how they would be treated afterwards.

Senior managers create formal and informal opportunities for staff to raise concerns and give feedback. Face-to-face visits and online meetings called 'keeping you connected', which started during the pandemic, give staff the opportunity to ask questions about matters that affect them. The service also has several staff support networks, which give staff the opportunity to seek support from peers in the service and in the council.

The ways in which the senior management team or local managers have addressed any matters raised have been positively received by staff. Representative bodies and

staff associations reported that the service works well with them. A survey by the representative body at the time of this inspection showed that the service regularly works with and consults it, and that it feels its opinion is valued by the service.

However, some staff now feel disconnected from the service due to a move towards fully flexible working. The service should consider the effect of this change on certain staff groups.

The service is good at tackling bullying, harassment, and discrimination

Staff have a good understanding of what bullying, harassment and discrimination are, and their negative effect on colleagues and the organisation.

In this inspection, 5.6 percent (7 of 123) of staff survey respondents told us they had been harassed, and 9.7 percent (12 of 123) had been discriminated against over the past 12 months. Of these, 21 percent (4 of 19) thought their concerns were dealt with appropriately.

Most staff are confident in the service's approach to tackling bullying, harassment and discrimination, grievances, and disciplinary matters. Staff told us about positive experiences even when raising grievances. They described action plans that the service had put in place to improve environment and culture in the service.

The service regularly reviews its dignity and harassment policy, and grievances of this nature are monitored so that the service can address any level of bullying, harassment, or discrimination.

The service has made sure all staff are trained and clear about what to do if they encounter inappropriate behaviour. Service leaders have put in place several ways for staff to give feedback. They have also improved how they respond to feedback, so that staff, including those from diverse backgrounds and under-represented groups, have a better experience.

The service could do more to increase diversity in its workforce

The service knows it needs to go further to increase workforce diversity. It has made some improvements to recruitment campaigns, to reach under-represented groups and increase the diversity of its workforce. For example, it has used a wide variety of representatives from the service in its more recent recruitment campaigns, to highlight the different range of roles a firefighter might take on in their day-to-day duties. We were told that the service plans to promote future opportunities via local fire stations and by working with community groups, which include faith-based groups and groups from ethnic minority backgrounds.

But the service needs to do more. There has been slow progress at improving ethnic background and gender diversity for all staff in the service. Since 2017/18, 3.5 percent of new joiners have self-declared as being from ethnic minority backgrounds, and 16.6 percent of new joiners were women. At 31 March 2021, of the whole workforce, 3.4 percent were self-declared as being from ethnic minority backgrounds and 12.7 percent were women. The proportions of staff in all services in England are 5.3 percent from ethnic minority backgrounds and 18.0 percent women.

The service needs to improve its recruitment processes

The service needs to do more to make sure its recruitment processes are fair and accessible to applicants from a range of backgrounds. For example, only 51.2 percent (63 of 123) of respondents to our staff survey agreed that recruitment processes were fair and accessible. The service should make sure all its selection panels are diverse. All staff on these panels should receive the proper training to reduce unconscious bias.

It is positive that the service advertises both internally and externally for new entrants, middle and senior level positions. It uses a range of media platforms to do this. It clearly describes the skills, behaviours and expectations for potential candidates.

It recently conducted a review with women who had left the service to better understand the reasons for their departure and look for areas it could improve. We look forward to seeing more activity in the service because of this work.

EDI is a priority for the service

The service has improved its approach to EDI. It is making sure it can offer the right services to its communities and that it can support staff with protected characteristics. For example, the deputy chief fire officer is chair of the equality and inclusion group, which staff from across the service's staff support networks attend monthly. Networks encourage activity in the service, raise awareness, and support staff and the service to test new ideas and projects.

Diversity and inclusion are a priority in the service's CRMP. The service gives all staff regular online and face-to-face training. It also has a dedicated people and wellbeing plan, and a working group to monitor and encourage progress.

The service told us that they have recently seen an increase in the rates of staff diversity declaration. This means that staff are comfortable to share equality information such as sex and race. The service believes this is due to increased supportive discussions and consultations with staff about the benefits of having this information, and the way it can be used to break down barriers.

The service has appropriate facilities in its stations, and staff reported that in some places these had been recently refurbished. The service has given all its staff correctly fitting and appropriate uniform after we identified this as an area for improvement in our last inspection.

The service has recently embarked on a new campaign with Oxford United Football Club to jointly promote and raise awareness of EDI. It also works with other fire and rescue services in the region to share skills, knowledge and expertise in matters affecting both the fire sector and wider communities.

It has a new process in place to assess equality impact and acts as needed to improve equality. The service gave us examples. These included assessing the effect changes to one of its shift patterns might have on staff and assessing how making safe and well education available to the public in different formats might negatively or positively affect people with protected characteristics.

The service has a plan to train staff in this new equality impact process and to involve members of the staff support networks or equality and inclusion group to develop the assessment. It should continue to review and update policies and procedures using the new process.

Managing performance and developing leaders



Requires improvement (2019: Requires improvement)

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

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

Areas for improvement

- The service should improve all staff understanding and application of the performance development review process.
- The service should put in place an open and fair process to identify, develop and support high-potential staff and aspiring leaders.

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

The service should make sure it takes a consistent approach to managing individuals' performance

The service has an inconsistent process in place for managing individual staff performance and development. Not all staff have specific and individual objectives or have had their performance assessed in the past year. The service should make sure it takes a consistent approach to managing staff performance and development.

However, in our staff survey 70.8 percent (87 of 123) of respondents reported that they do have regular, meaningful discussions with their manager. Some staff reported following Oxfordshire County Council's 12:3:2 performance framework, which includes an informal monthly conversation about wellbeing and performance, 3 more in-depth individual meetings a year and 2 annual team review sessions. The use of this framework varied between staff groups and didn't connect with the service's current promotion process.

Promotion and progression processes could improve

The service needs to do more to make sure its promotion and progression processes are seen as fair by staff. Although the process is clearly outlined in the service's policy, we heard that it can be inconsistently applied, that it is overly onerous at lower management levels and for on-call staff, and that it doesn't apply to those in support or specialist roles. In our staff survey, 32.5 percent (40 of 123) of respondents disagreed or tended to disagree with the statement that promotion processes in the service were fair.

We are encouraged to see that the service understands this is an issue. It has drafted a new development pathway and recently commissioned an external company to help review this area. We look forward to seeing the progress it makes with this proposal.

We also reviewed the service's recent promotion processes. We found that they were conducted fairly and that a diverse interview panel was used. We saw evidence that the service supports the future development of candidates by offering constructive feedback to those who are unsuccessful in the promotion.

The service has improved the way it manages temporary promotions, but we found evidence of them still being in place for longer than appropriate. For example, in the year to 31 March 2021, there were 53 temporary promotions in the service, lasting on average for 282 days.

The service still needs to improve its ability to identify and develop its future leaders and high-potential staff at all levels

The service still needs to improve how it actively manages the career pathways of all staff, including those with specialist skills and for leadership roles. The service has made limited progress in addressing this area for improvement, which we identified in 2019. As such, the area for improvement remains. The service should put in place an open and fair process to identify, develop, and support high-potential staff and aspiring leaders.

It has some talent management schemes in place to develop leaders and high-potential staff. These include traditional assessment centres, as well as the service actively considering the new leadership and development framework developed by the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#). But staff described these as not always being managed openly or fairly. The schemes don't apply to non-operational staff, and the application process is too complex for some roles. This has resulted in inconsistency and undermines staff's perception of fairness in the process.

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