

# Fire & Rescue Service 2023–25

## Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service

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# Changes to this round of inspection

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

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

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

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

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

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

More information on [how we assess fire and rescue services](#) and [our graded judgments](#) is available on our website.

# Overall summary

## Our judgments

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

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

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

## HMI summary

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

Overall, I am pleased with the performance of Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service in keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks. But it needs to improve in some areas to provide a consistently good service. For example, the service has recently reviewed its risk information process, but it has yet to be fully implemented. Firefighters should also improve their knowledge and

understanding of local risks. A more effective risk information process and greater familiarisation with local risks should improve the safety of the public and attending firefighters.

We were pleased to see that the service has made progress since our 2021 inspection. The principal findings from our assessments of the service over the past year are as follows:

- The service has improved its approach to prevention. Operational crews continue to support the community safety department with an improved, targeted approach to [safe and well visits \(SAWVs\)](#). The service is building partnerships that help it target members of the community who are most vulnerable to fire risk.
- The service has a sound understanding of its future financial challenges and plans accordingly, using its assessment of risk in the county to guide it. The service actively seeks efficiencies and uses technology to further improve performance.
- The service has a much-improved approach to its values and culture, and this is evident at all levels of the organisation. The newly implemented people strategy bases its expectations of staff on the service's code of ethics. Staff told us that they feel empowered to challenge unacceptable behaviours and are confident they will be supported by managers when they do.
- The service has made a commitment to improve its approach to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). This includes assigning a dedicated EDI lead. Staff awareness of EDI issues has improved and continues to do so. There is further work to be done on updating [equality impact assessments](#), and the service recognises the need for this. It would benefit the service if all staff across the organisation developed a better understanding of the need for positive action and how this could improve equality and diversity.

Overall, I am pleased with how Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service has improved since our last inspection. I encourage the service to continue to improve in the areas we have highlighted and look forward to seeing how this benefits the public and the organisation in the future.



**Roy Wilsher**

HM Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

# Service in numbers



## Profile

	Northumberland	England
Area		
Square miles	1,943	50,370
Population (thousands)		
30 June 2021	322	56,536
Population density		
Thousands per square mile	0.2	1.1



## Cost

Funding		
Year ending 31 March 2022	-	£2.5bn
Expenditure per population		
Year ending 31 March 2022	£58.24	£41.88

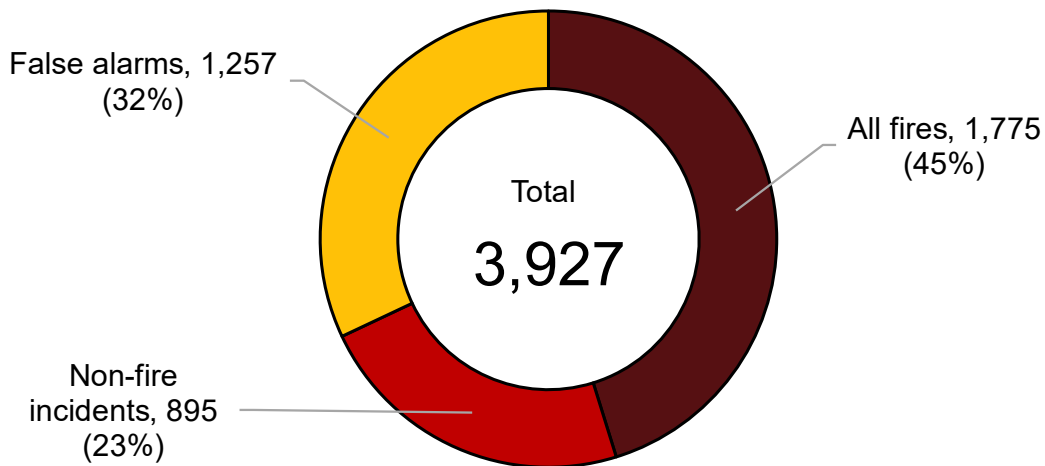


## Response

Incidents attended per 1,000 population		
Year ending 31 December 2022	12.2	11.1
Home fire safety checks carried out by fire and rescue service per 1,000 population		
Year ending 31 March 2022	15.5	7.7
Fire safety audits per 100 known premises		
Year ending 31 March 2022	4.9	2.0
Availability of wholetime pumps		
Year ending 31 March 2022	90.0%	
Availability of on-call pumps		
Year ending 31 March 2022	82.1%	



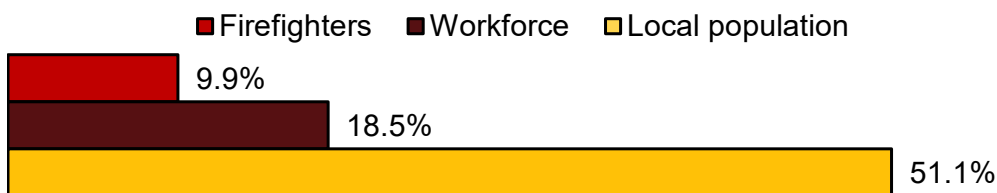
## Incidents attended in the year to 31 December 2022



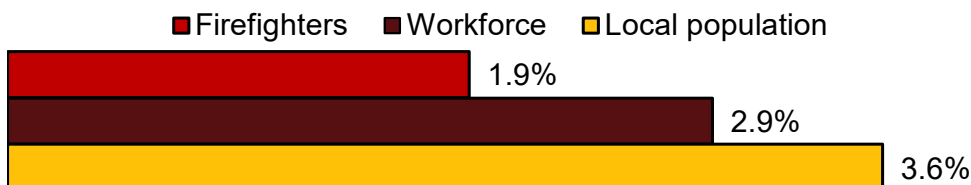
## Workforce

	Northumberland	England
Five-year change in total workforce 2017 to 2022	-0.9%	0.2%
Number of firefighters per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2022	0.88	0.62
Percentage of firefighters who are wholetime Year ending 31 March 2022	51.1%	65.2%

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



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



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



# Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies

## Adequate

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service is adequate at understanding risk.

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

### Area for improvement

The service should make sure it gathers and records relevant and up-to-date risk information to help protect firefighters, the public and property during an emergency.

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

### Main findings

#### The service is improving its understanding of risk

The service has assessed a suitable range of risks and threats using a thorough community risk management planning process. In its assessment of risk, it uses information it has collected from a broad range of internal and external sources and datasets. This includes working with [Operational Research in Health](#) to develop a risk profile of the county. The service has also considered [NHS frailty scores](#), census data, data from partners, historical incident data and environmental factors.

When appropriate, the service has consulted and held constructive dialogue with its communities and other relevant parties to understand risk and explain how it intends to mitigate it. For example, the service has developed a consultation and engagement plan in conjunction with an external consultant who was employed to facilitate effective communication.

The service used online, paper-based and face-to-face communication to make sure that as many people as possible could be involved. This included people from community groups, Age UK and Northumberland County Council staff networks. [Vulnerable people](#) and officers and councillors from county and district councils were also involved in the process.

During the consultation, the service received feedback on areas of its [community risk management plan \(CRMP\)](#) that could be more informative. It has made changes as a result.

### **The service has an effective CRMP**

Once it has assessed risks, the service records its findings in an easily understood CRMP. The service refers to its CRMP as *Northumberland Fire and Rescue Community Risk Management Plan 2022–2026 – Making Northumberland Safer*.

The CRMP describes how the service intends to use its prevention, protection and response activities to mitigate or reduce the risks and threats the community faces both now and in the future. It provides a clear outline of the risks specific to Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service using data from 2016–2021. It identifies the most frequently attended types of incidents in order to target resources effectively. The service has improved its knowledge about risk by linking its CRMP to the community risk register and risks identified by the [local resilience forum \(LRF\)](#) – a multi-agency partnership that includes local emergency services, local authorities, health services, the [Environment Agency](#) and others.

In order to build resilience around emergency planning and public health, the service has considered future emerging risk by linking its CRMP to the findings of the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) and the challenges presented by the recent pandemic. Future community risks include:

- housing and commercial development plans;
- an ageing population and increased vulnerability;
- the possible creation of the UK's first 'gigaplant' (manufacturing electric car batteries) on the site of the former Blyth power station; and
- a planned railway project – the Northumberland Line.

The service is actively monitoring the progress of these potential new risks to make sure that it is prepared to respond.

## **There is more to do to improve the accuracy of the service's site-specific risk information**

An area identified for improvement in our 2021 inspection was that the service should make sure its firefighters have good access to relevant and up-to-date site-specific risk information (SSRI). We were encouraged to find that the service had reviewed and improved its approach to the SSRI process. But more work is needed, and this remains an area for improvement.

During our inspection, some staff we spoke to weren't clear about what the service defines as risk or if the risk categories assigned to sites were always reasonable. Firefighters told us about instances when after gathering information from visits to sites that they felt were high risk, the risk category was then reduced by supervisory staff during the quality assurance process. The service told us that it categorises sites and buildings as lower risk when there is a high level of compliance with fire safety regulations and it considers there is a low likelihood of fire. When the service reduces the risk category of a site or building, it also reduces how often it carries out an SSRI visit.

The service needs to make sure that the risk categories it assigns to sites are appropriate. To make sure that the service gathers relevant and up-to-date risk information, SSRI visits should be frequent enough to identify and consider changes that may have been made to buildings that could increase the risk of fire.

The service collects some information about the highest-risk people, places and threats it has identified. But some of the information we reviewed was limited, inaccurate or out of date. We found that some of the firefighters we spoke to were unable to show us that they could access, use and share risk information quickly to help them resolve incidents safely.

## **The service is effective when sharing risk information**

Where the service has recorded risk information, it communicates it effectively. It also routinely updates [risk assessments](#) and uses feedback from local and national operational activities to inform its planning assumptions. For example, the service has improved its process to routinely exchange risk information with others.

The introduction of an electronic form allows a structured approach when sharing risk information across the organisation. Other forms of communication include safety flashes, departmental manager meetings and weekly newsletters, all of which have improved organisational awareness.

The service routinely shares and reviews [joint organisation learning](#) and [national operational learning](#) to inform its planning assumptions.

It would benefit the service to have an assurance process in place to record all risk-critical information that is shared, read, understood and acknowledged by each staff member.

# Preventing fires and other risks

Good

Northumberland 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 sectors, and with the police and ambulance services. They should share [intelligence](#) and risk information with these other organisations when they identify vulnerability or exploitation.

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

## Main findings

### The service's prevention strategy drives its activity

The service's prevention strategy is linked to the risks it has identified in its CRMP. The service has used a broad range of data to identify vulnerable people in the community. And it continues to improve the way it uses numerous datasets to highlight areas at high risk and to target those areas with activity to reduce fire risk.

The service's teams work well together and with other relevant organisations on prevention, and they share relevant information when needed. The service uses information to adjust its planning assumptions and direct activity between its prevention, protection and response functions. It is an active participant in the Northumberland County Council road safety co-ordination group and the [north-east regional road safety resource](#). Using data from the road safety groups, the service can plan and prioritise response, education, training and campaigns in its annual station plans.

Prevention and operational crews are proactive in identifying trends and collaborating with partners to inform and educate the public.

## **Prevention activity is targeted effectively**

The service uses a risk-based approach to clearly prioritise people most at risk from fire and other emergencies by focusing prevention activity on them. For example, station plans are produced annually featuring targeted activity throughout the year. This activity is aligned with the risks identified in the CRMP, such as road and water safety. Prevention targets are set annually to accommodate periods of increased operational activity.

The service uses various datasets from internal and external sources to identify vulnerabilities and risks in the county. This enables it to better direct and target SAWVs to make sure prevention work is effective. Staff told us that they are now reaching the more vulnerable members of the community.

The service has adopted a resource-to-risk approach, which directs resources to reduce the risks it identifies. Using this approach, operational crews supported the community safety department to carry out high-risk SAWVs during a period when staff numbers were low. This allowed the service to continue to target the most vulnerable members of the community. This approach has proved to be successful. For example, in 2021/22, the number of SAWVs completed per 1,000 population was much higher than the England rate. It is essential that the service continues to target and complete outstanding SAWVs to reduce risk effectively.

We were encouraged to see the introduction of an automated system, SafeLinks, for booking SAWVs. This has led to a more efficient process for the service to receive SAWV referrals.

The service carries out a range of interventions, which it adapts to the level of risk in its communities. The service works in partnership with the youth justice team and the Northumberland Office of the [Police and Crime Commissioner](#). Together they directly refer young people to [fire cadets](#), the [Prince's Trust](#) programme and the [Extinguish](#) programme. Extinguish provides targeted education to children and young people up to the age of 18 who present a fire risk and contributes to the reduction of [antisocial behaviour](#) and deliberate fire setting.

## **The service should improve the training of operational staff**

Staff told us they have the right skills and confidence to make SAWVs. These checks cover an appropriate range of hazards that can put vulnerable people at greater risk from fire and other emergencies. The service's aim during SAWVs is 'making every contact count'. It identifies fire risk and other risks by assessing each individual and their behaviour in the home and signposts them to specialist support when needed.

Additionally, we were pleased to see that the service has adopted safe and well champions who visit stations to give staff training and promote best practice. This should be developed further to make sure that crews are supported in this area.

However, there is still work to be done in the service's prevention department. Staff told us that training for operational crews on systems and processes for prevention needs to be improved and formalised.

The service should put processes in place to make sure that vulnerable people who might be difficult to contact are monitored and action is taken to reduce their fire or other risk. Any action should be recorded to create clear, auditable records of events for the service.

### **The service is responding effectively to safeguarding concerns**

Staff we interviewed told us about occasions when they had identified [safeguarding](#) problems. They told us that they feel confident and trained to act appropriately and promptly. They undertake training in safeguarding, which includes how to report concerns relating to both adults and children.

At the date of our inspection, the service had successfully carried out 65 consented safeguarding interventions from a possible 67. These happen when a vulnerable person is identified by fire service staff and consent is given to receive further support from another agency.

To help identify vulnerable individuals, the service gathers information using a risk information sheet, which all staff can access. Risk forms are only processed by the control team to make sure the service uses a consistent approach. Control operators are then able to view historical calls and reasons for the previous [mobilisation](#) of crews, along with potential threats or vulnerabilities. Where needed, they pass information to responding operational crews.

### **The service works effectively with partners**

The service works with a wide range of organisations to prevent fires and other emergencies. These include Northumberland County Council teams, such as adults' and children's social care, housing providers, emergency planning and safeguarding support. The service also has good working relationships with external partners, such as the Alzheimer's Society, National Highways, Northumbria Police, North East Ambulance Service and [family hubs](#) (formerly known as Sure Start). We found evidence that the service refers people at greatest risk to these organisations, which may better meet their needs.

The service told us that a recent partnership with Harrogate and District NHS Foundation Trust has provided 'hazard spotting' training for 140 of the trust's staff on behalf of the fire service. Advocates from this service proactively promote fire safety in their own day-to-day work and make referrals on behalf of vulnerable residents. The service also informed us as a result, 900 risk referrals have been made to the service's community safety department. The service prioritises the referrals and takes appropriate action to reduce risk.

The service routinely exchanges information with other public sector organisations about people and groups at greatest risk. It uses this information to challenge planning assumptions and target prevention activity. The service told us that, working with Northumberland County Council, it has identified 184 families that have been relocated to Northumberland. The service has provided these families with SAWVs to improve their fire safety and reduce any other risks identified during the visits.

### **The service works well with other organisations to tackle fire-setting behaviour**

The service has a range of suitable and effective interventions to target and educate people who show signs of fire-setting behaviour. These include fire cadets, the Extinguish programme and the Prince's Trust programme.

When appropriate, it routinely shares information with relevant organisations to support the prosecution of arsonists. The service has established good working relationships with the safer streets team and the youth justice team's out-of-court disposal panel. Sharing information in relation to fire-setting behaviours has increased the number of referrals to the service's Extinguish programme.

### **The service is improving its evaluation of prevention activities**

Our last inspection highlighted the need to quality assure prevention activity so that staff carry out SAWVs to an appropriate standard. Since our last visit, the service has developed and implemented a quality assurance and evaluation policy to assess the outcomes. Activity relating to assurance is highlighted as a service core measure and overseen at a senior level.



# Protecting the public through fire regulation

## Adequate

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

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

### Areas for improvement

The service should make sure it allocates enough resources to a prioritised and risk-based inspection programme.

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

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

### Main findings

#### **Protection activity is linked to the risks identified in the CRMP**

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

Staff across the service are involved in this activity, effectively exchanging information as needed. For example, the introduction of Microsoft Teams, an online information-sharing platform, allows the service to share risk-critical information throughout the organisation. The service then uses the information to adjust planning assumptions and direct activity between its protection, prevention and response functions. This means resources are better aligned with risk.



## **The service could improve how it assesses and categorises risk in its risk-based inspection programme**

The service told us that its risk-based inspection programme currently holds approximately 3,500 premises that require audits.

Using its fire safety audits, information-gathering processes and professional judgment, the service aims to produce a risk score by considering the following three principles:

1. societal life risk (when fire would have a significant effect on wider society);
2. likelihood of fire occurring; and
3. likelihood of non-compliance (the likelihood of a building not complying with fire safety regulations).

The service uses its historical data from completed fire safety audits to determine compliance levels, size of building, number of occupants and the provision of passive and active fire protection. This approach allows the service to focus its resources on premises that are less likely to be compliant with fire safety regulations.

However, we found that not all staff understood how risk categorisation was determined and, therefore, how they should prioritise their work. We found that the service wasn't consistently auditing the buildings it has targeted in the time frames it has set. When we reviewed the outstanding audits in the service's risk-based inspection programme, it was clear that the service isn't able to meet its own targets for auditing. During our inspection, we found some outstanding cases, including re-categorised medium-risk premises, that were overdue for review by three years according to the service's time frames. It is essential that the service makes sure it still monitors and meets its own risk-based inspection programme time frames.

## **The quality of audits is inconsistent**

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

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

Not all the audits we reviewed were completed in a consistent, systematic way or in line with the service's policies. Of the documents we reviewed, some were out of date according to the service's own frequency time frames.

There is an effective process in place to share risk-critical information gathered from audits throughout the service.

### **The service is improving its use of enforcement**

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

In the year ending 31 March 2022, the service issued 2 alteration notices, 183 informal notifications, 2 enforcement notices, 8 prohibition notices and undertook no prosecutions.

However, as a result of a fire safety audit carried out in June 2021, the service has since been successful in two prosecutions in the county. One resulted in a custodial sentence.

### **The service should make sure it allocates enough resources to meet its protection strategy**

Staff told us that they don't feel the service has enough suitably qualified protection staff who audit and enforce fire safety regulations. The service isn't currently on track to meet its risk-based inspection programme time frames. It is aware of this and plans to carry out a review of protection services that will identify exactly what is required.

The service is also aware of the appeal that the private sector has for qualified fire safety officers and as a result, has amended officer contracts to improve staff retention.

Supervisory managers have been given the appropriate training to carry out low and very low-risk audits in the county. This helps the service provide the 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 adapting to new legislation**

Since our last inspection, the [Building Safety Act 2022](#) and the [Fire Safety Regulations 2022](#) have been introduced to bring about better regulation and management of tall buildings.

The Fire Safety Regulations 2022 introduced a range of duties for the managers of tall buildings. These include a requirement to give the fire and rescue service floor plans and inform them of any substantial faults to essential firefighting equipment, such as firefighting lifts.

Northumberland doesn't currently have any tall buildings. However, this will change with the development of the county's first high-rise building, which will affect the service and how it effectively responds to this building type.

The service is supporting the introduction of the [Building Safety Regulator](#) by actively providing some training to crews about the operational elements required to respond to tall buildings. The service should make sure that it is prepared to respond to a building of this type.

### **The service has good working relationships with others**

The service works closely with other enforcement agencies to regulate fire safety, and it routinely exchanges risk information with them. The service has sometimes taken a joint approach with the county council's building control department to assess all elements of a premises. This joint approach is replicated with environmental health for inspections of schools and houses in multiple occupation.

Other work involves two-way communication channels between the service and the [Care Quality Commission](#), which inspects care homes. They notify each other of any suspected breaches.

### **The service responds effectively to business consultations**

The service responds to all building consultations on time. This means it consistently meets its statutory responsibility to comment on fire safety arrangements at new and altered buildings. In 2021/22, the service responded to 99 percent of building consultations and 100 percent of licensing consultations within the required time frame.

The service could further improve its targeting of new risk using its close relationship with Northumberland County Council to access business rates data.

### **The service does some work with local businesses**

The service does some work with local businesses and other organisations to promote compliance with fire safety legislation. For example, the service has provided business fire safety presentations to Northumberland County Council landlord forums.

Since our last inspection, the service has added a dedicated business safety page to its website with key safety messages and advice. The page also has information about how businesses can get in contact with the fire protection team if required.

### **The service has taken action to reduce unwanted fire signals**

The service is taking some action to reduce the number of unwanted fire signals. There are processes in place to monitor unwanted fire signals through call-challenging and cost-recovery procedures. Furthermore, the service has an approach to reduce its automatic attendance to lessen the effect on attending resources. However, during 2021/22 it received 911 automated fire alarm calls and attended 717 of them. This means fire engines may not be available to respond to genuine incidents because they are attending false alarms. It also creates a risk to the public if more fire engines travel at high speed on the roads to respond to these incidents.

# Responding to fires and other emergencies

## Adequate

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

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

### Area for improvement

The service should make sure operational staff are familiar with the risk sites in their local area, so they are better prepared to fight fires and carry out rescues safely.

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

### Main findings

#### The service reviews response standards and availability

The service's response strategy is linked to the risks it has identified in its CRMP. Its fire engines and response staff, as well as its working patterns, are designed and located to help the service respond flexibly to fires and other emergencies with the appropriate resources. For example, the service reviews its duty systems to make sure it is responding effectively and efficiently to risk in the county. It has undertaken a targeted risk review using Operational Research in Health data to identify risk areas and align fire engine availability accordingly.

## The service has improved its response performance

There are no national response standards of performance for the public. The service has, therefore, set its own response standards in its CRMP and states that it aims to meet its own targets 80 percent of the time. Home Office data shows that in the year ending 31 March 2022, the service's average response time to [primary fires](#) was 12 minutes and 25 seconds, which is 1 minute and 40 seconds slower than the average of 10 minutes and 45 seconds for predominantly rural services.

For the year ending March 2022, the service was unable to meet its own standards, which were:

- first fire engine to property fire within 10 minutes – standard achieved 66 percent of the time;
- second fire engine to property fire within 13 minutes – standard achieved 56 percent of the time;
- first fire engine to road traffic collision within 15 minutes – standard achieved 67 percent of the time; and
- second fire engine to road traffic collision within 20 minutes – standard met 75 percent of the time.

The service plans to review its response standards in its annual response plan 2023/24.

During our inspection, the service told us that it has already carried out some work to improve its response times. The control room has introduced call performance monitoring. This allows call operators to review their own performance while mobilising fire engines to improve the efficiency of call handling. As a result, the service told us that it has significantly improved its response times. It provided us with the following data during our inspection:

- first fire engine to property fire within 10 minutes – the service told us the standard is now achieved 86 percent of the time;
- second fire engine to property fire within 13 minutes – the service told us the standard is now achieved 100 percent of the time;
- first fire engine to road traffic collision within 15 minutes – the service told us the standard is now achieved 89 percent of the time; and
- second fire engine to road traffic collision within 20 minutes – the service told us the standard is now achieved 84 percent of the time.

## **The service is working towards improving its availability**

To support its response strategy, the service aims to have 100 percent of fire engines available 95 percent of the time. This is an ambitious target for the service and although it isn't always meeting this standard, it is still performing better for availability when compared to similar services. During 2021/22, the overall availability was 84 percent. [Wholetime](#) availability during this period was 90 percent and [on-call](#) availability was 82 percent.

The service recognises that it doesn't meet its target and has driven change to address this. The rural demographic of the county and its predominantly on-call response structure have some effect on availability. The service uses a resource-to-risk model to make sure that it responds effectively. This model means that by using data to assess risk throughout the county, it can effectively provide fire engine availability where it is most needed. To support this process, the service has introduced multi-skilled community risk and response support officers in each staffing cluster to strengthen on-call availability. This provides resilience to stations that may require support to keep a fire engine available.

The service has also increased its on-call recruitment to three times a year. Historically, recruitment to employ retained firefighters has been limited to once a year. Increasing the frequency of recruitment will maximise the availability of firefighters throughout the county.

## **The service's command function is effective**

The service has trained incident commanders, who are assessed regularly and properly. Using an internal team of incident command instructors allows the service to make sure that revalidation takes place routinely every 24 months. The service achieves further improvements in command qualifications in line with the national standard and operational guidance via the [Fire Service College](#). This helps the service safely, assertively and effectively manage the whole range of incidents it could face, from small and routine ones to complex multi-agency incidents.

As part of our inspection, we interviewed incident commanders from across the service. They were familiar with risk assessing, decision-making and recording information at incidents in line with national best practice as well as the [Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles \(JESIP\)](#).

## **Improvements have been made in control**

The service's control department has been integrated into the response function. We were pleased to see that as a result, the service's control staff are included in its command, training, exercise, debrief and assurance activity. It also means that training plans for control staff are aligned with training for operational crews. This will undergo further development in line with [national operational guidance](#).

We were also pleased to see the introduction of control training days and the effort dedicated to developing control staff competencies. We look forward to seeing how this progresses.

### **The service has improved its risk information process**

We sampled a range of risk information from wholetime and on-call stations. This included the information in place for firefighters responding to incidents at high-risk commercial and residential buildings and information held by [fire control](#), including data on cross-border risk.

The service has reviewed its process to share risk information, which is robust and effective. Staff can easily access and understand it. Encouragingly, when risk information is completed, it is done with input from the service's prevention, protection and response functions when appropriate.

### **Firefighters should have a better understanding of risk in their areas**

Since our last inspection, the service has carried out a review of how it collects SSRI and categorises risk. This change in process puts greater emphasis on the need for crews to familiarise themselves with the risks in their own station area and surrounding station areas.

Staff told us that they don't have a formal process in place that allows them to become familiar with the risks in their area. Furthermore, they haven't received any formal training in how familiarisation visits should be carried out and how any risks identified should be recorded or shared with colleagues.

It is paramount to firefighter safety that familiarisation visits to premises and the risks they may pose are regular and detailed. All information gathered from visits should be uploaded to [mobile data terminals](#) and shared with colleagues and surrounding stations.

### **The service aligns its performance with national operational guidance**

As part of this inspection, we reviewed a range of emergency incidents and training events. This included a large-scale incident at Haltwhistle Working Men's Club.

We were pleased to see that the service routinely follows its policies to make sure that staff command incidents in line with operational guidance. It updates internal risk information with the information it receives. The service has introduced an operational feedback form to allow for effective information gathering, along with a newly established safety and assurance forum. It would be beneficial for the service to give feedback to operational crews to improve their learning. The service exchanges this information with appropriate organisations, such as the county council's emergency planning department, and is also an active partner in the LRF.



The service has responded to learning from incidents to improve its service to the public. For example, we viewed a detailed operational learning presentation that had been delivered to staff throughout the organisation. The presentation, which was developed by the training, assurance and safety team, was interactive and included live video evidence of the incident being discussed.

We were encouraged to see that the service is contributing towards and acting on learning from other fire and rescue services or operational learning gathered from emergency service partners. This includes monitoring national operational learning and joint organisation learning for updates. This is carried out by one person who oversees all national learning for the service. The service has made 2 submissions to national operational learning in the last 12 months.

### **The service is improving how it keeps the public informed**

The service has good systems in place to inform members of the public about ongoing incidents and help keep them safe during and after incidents. This includes posts on numerous social media sites, such as Facebook and X (formerly known as Twitter). The service also has 24-hour access to the Northumberland County Council alerts system that disseminates risk-critical or community alerts to the whole county.



# Responding to major and multi-agency incidents

## Adequate

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

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

### Area for improvement

The service should make sure it reviews its policies and procedures for mass evacuation and that staff understand them.

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

### Main findings

#### **The service is prepared for major and multi-agency incidents**

The service has effectively anticipated and considered the reasonably foreseeable risks and threats it may face. These risks are listed in both local and national risk registers as part of its community risk management planning. For example, the Northumberland community risk register and the service's community risk management plan include:

- flooding
- wildfire
- adverse weather
- utilities failure
- pandemic.

It is also familiar with the significant risks neighbouring fire and rescue services may face and which it might reasonably be asked to respond to in an emergency.

### **The service should address the Grenfell Tower Inquiry recommendations**

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

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

Since Northumberland currently has no high-rise buildings, it has developed only a limited number of policies and procedures for safely managing this type of incident. However, there are other types of buildings that may require simultaneous evacuation, such as residential homes. Furthermore, there are also developments underway for the first high-rise building in the county. We found that the service wasn't well prepared to evacuate large numbers of casualties.

During our inspection, we found that the control department was prepared to receive high volumes of calls. The service can share its mobilising system with neighbouring Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service, which can provide resilience if required. The control department has knowledge of the processes to follow and has practised Operation Willowbeck, which allows a service to help another by taking a large number of 999 calls. The service's control department has also helped London Fire Brigade with a flooding incident when it dealt with high volumes of calls on its behalf. This experience has allowed the service to assure itself of its capabilities and identify future development needs. Further training exercises around its own policies and procedures for such incident types are essential to guarantee the safety of the public.

It is evident that the service relies too heavily on paper-based systems. Emergency calls are processed and logged by an operator. Risk-critical information is passed via the radio or the fire engine's mobile data terminal to staff at the incident to maximise operational awareness. During our inspection, we carried out an exercise to test this and it wasn't clear from the service's current system when action had been taken at the address in the exercise. All updates were reliant on messages from staff at the incident. These systems are too open to operator error. They also mean that staff in the emergency control room, at the incident and in assisting control rooms can't share, view and update actions in real time.

The service would benefit from reviewing national operational learning from the Grenfell Tower Inquiry in order to improve its response policies and procedures.

### **The service is good at working with other fire and rescue services**

The service supports other fire and rescue services responding to emergency incidents. For example, the service has deployed its assets to neighbouring Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service to support it in a wildfire incident. Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service chairs the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#)'s UK wildfire group and specialises in this type of response. It is interoperable with these services and can form part of a multi-agency response.

### **The service should do more cross-border exercising**

The service has a cross-border exercise plan with neighbouring fire and rescue services, helping them work together effectively to keep the public safe. The plan includes the risks of major events at which the service could foreseeably give support or ask for help from neighbouring services. However, we found that not all operational crews were aware of or involved in major incident or cross-border exercising. Therefore, they would benefit from further experience of this.

### **Incident commanders have a good understanding of JESIP**

The incident commanders we interviewed had been trained in and were familiar with JESIP. The service gave us strong evidence that it consistently follows these principles. This includes the use of JESIP and [M/ETHANE](#) information to make sure multi-agency incidents are managed effectively. This is strengthened by the introduction of a dedicated [national inter-agency liaison officer](#) in the service's control department.

We sampled a range of debriefs that the service had carried out after multi-agency incidents and exercises. We were encouraged to find that the service had identified any problems it had with applying JESIP and took appropriate, prompt action with other emergency services.

The service is an active member of the LRF and has identified a county-wide need for training in marauding terrorist attacks. The LRF covers a vast area that incorporates a number of fire and police services as well as North East Ambulance Service. Training is usually held annually in an urban location outside the county. Therefore, the service has negotiated with the LRF to make sure that terrorist attack exercising is held once every other year in the county.

### **The service works well with other partner organisations**

The service has good arrangements in place to respond to emergencies with partners that make up the Northumbria LRF. These arrangements include working with other organisations, such as local authorities, health services, the Environment Agency, HM Coastguard and utility companies to plan and prepare for emergencies to provide an effective and efficient response.

The service takes part in regular training events with other members of the LRF and uses the learning to develop planning assumptions about responding to major and multi-agency incidents. The service has a debrief process in place where learning can be recorded and fed back to staff via the training, assurance and safety group. One dedicated person creates an action plan from this learning and cross-references it with planning documents that involve other organisations (via the LRF). Improvements could be made to develop staff awareness of how to access learning.

### **The service monitors national learning**

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

# Making best use of resources

## Adequate

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service is adequate at making best use of its resources.

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

The service's revenue budget for 2023/24 is £19 million. This is a 9 percent increase from the previous financial year.

### Areas for improvement

The service should make sure there is a testing programme for its business continuity arrangements, particularly in high-risk areas of service.

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

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

### Main findings

#### **The service effectively reviews and allocates resources to risk**

The service's financial and workforce plans, including allocating resources to prevention, protection and response, are consistent with the risks and priorities it has identified in its CRMP. Operational crews support both prevention and protection departments in their service delivery, which allows specialist staff to focus on the highest risk in the county.

The service has evaluated its mix of crewing and duty systems. It has analysed its response cover and can show it deploys its fire engines and response staff to manage risk efficiently. The service has used external data research from the independent organisation Operational Research in Health to undertake a comprehensive review of its [risk modelling](#). This modelling includes prevention, protection and response. The service consistently reviews its duty systems and the location of stations to effectively direct resources to risk and demand. It is exploring whether it can tailor on-call contracts to include specific times to allow for the efficient and effective allocation of resources in relation to risk. This is coupled with the service's cluster model, which provides multi-skilled community risk and response support officers in each staffing cluster. It provides dynamic, mobile support to strengthen on-call availability at stations that need it. This approach helps keep a fire engine available at stations with low staff levels.

The service builds its plans 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 service has close and effective financial arrangements with Northumberland County Council. Through a 'star chamber' meeting process, the service has to justify its proposed current and future revenue and capital spending plans to the [fire and rescue authority](#) and senior officers from the council.

### **The service is improving workforce productivity**

We were encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since our last inspection. We were pleased to see that the service's arrangements for managing performance clearly link resource use to its CRMP and its strategic priorities. Each station has its own bespoke station plan that clearly outlines expected activity throughout the year, including prevention. Targets are set annually to allow for flexibility around increased operational activity. Where there are increased seasonal incidents such as wildfires, the annual station plan and flexible targets give autonomy to the officer in charge to direct activity.

The service understands how it uses firefighters and control staff. It collects data on how they spend their time and makes the most of its capacity. For example, the service has taken steps to understand how firefighters and fire control staff use their time over an average shift and has carried out a productivity review. It has introduced annual operating plans that are directly linked to the targeted station plans. This provides a structured approach to the work that operational staff are required to carry out to meet the priorities outlined in the CRMP.

On-call staff proactively carry out prevention activity to reduce risk. Often, they will extend their weekly allotted training time to incorporate prevention activities, such as SAWVs, to help maximise operational training time. They also attend local community events to represent the fire service and to proactively promote awareness and campaigns.

The service is taking steps to make sure the workforce's time is as productive as possible. This includes putting in place new ways of working. For example, it has relocated station managers to fire service headquarters. This allows the station-based [watch](#) commander to have more autonomy in decision-making and how firefighters spend their time to increase productivity. This in turn allows station managers to focus more on strategic planning. All firefighter activity is monitored monthly for assurance purposes.

### **The service should make sure that collaboration provides value for money**

We were pleased to see the service meets its statutory duty to collaborate. It routinely considers opportunities to collaborate with other emergency responders.

Collaborations include:

- various contracts and service-level agreements with other fire and rescue services;
- training – at the time of our inspection, the service provided the national wildfire lead;
- co-location with Northumbria Police, family hubs and North East Ambulance Service;
- a fire control system upgrade;
- joint vehicle purchases with mountain rescue and the police; and
- the Northumberland County Council BEST programme (a programme to provide the best value for money to the public).

Collaborative work is aligned with the priorities in the service's CRMP. For example, the service shares many of its estates with other organisations that serve the community, such as the police and family hubs. This has strengthened working relationships and the way that information about prevention activity is shared. This community work has reduced the number of fires started by deliberate fire setting and therefore benefits the service.

The service has also made a joint purchase of a 6x6 vehicle with the mountain rescue team and Northumbria Police. This vehicle will be located at a fire service premise to enable its use in rural incidents, such as wildfires. The police and mountain rescue will also have access to the vehicle for their own rural activity, such as combatting antisocial behaviour.

It is encouraging to see some collaboration taking place. However, we weren't satisfied that the service comprehensively monitors, reviews and evaluates the benefits and results of its collaborations.

### **The service would benefit from targeting and testing business continuity**

The service has gaps in its continuity arrangements for areas where it considers threats and risks to be high. This remains an area for improvement from our previous inspection. The service has since carried out a review to identify gaps in its business continuity planning and testing. However, at the time of this inspection, there had been little progress in this area.

The service doesn't regularly review and test all its plans, including those for industrial action. This means it can't be sure that plans are appropriate, and staff are unaware of the arrangements and their responsibilities.

The service has carried out an exercise to test for the loss of systems in the control room, but we found that a debrief didn't take place to share any learning outcomes or best practice with other teams.

The service would benefit from carrying out a full evacuation of its control room.

### **The service works effectively with Northumberland County Council to improve financial management**

There are regular reviews to consider all the service's expenditure, including its non-pay costs. This scrutiny makes sure the service gets value for money. For example, the council's finance team works closely with budget holders to review and challenge expenditure through monthly meetings. At the time of our inspection, there was a projected overspend of £784,000 in 2022/23. This was partly due to the increased use of overtime during a period of higher-than-anticipated demand because of wildfires in spring and summer 2022. It was also partly due to some unforeseen inflationary pressures, which have now been included in the 2023/24 revenue budget.

Since our last inspection the service has made savings and efficiencies, which haven't affected its operational performance and the service it gives the public. Since our last inspection, the service has made efficiencies in its fleet by extending contracts for operational and support vehicles. The service told us this change has produced a saving of approximately £30,000.

The service is taking steps to make sure it achieves efficiency gains through sound financial management and best working practices. It is doing this in important areas such as estates, fleet and procurement. Where appropriate, contracts are renegotiated to reduce non-pay costs. For example, the service has told us it has saved around £100,000 by taking responsibility for the maintenance of furniture, fittings and equipment at its fire stations provided under a [private finance initiative](#) contract.



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

Good

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

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

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

## Main findings

### The service understands its future financial challenges

The service has a sound understanding of future financial challenges. Northumberland County Council has supported the service with funding to mitigate its main or significant financial risks and to help the service meet its priorities. For example, the revenue budget has been increased by 19 percent since 2021/22. And the 2023/24 revenue budget includes additional funding to cover inflation pressures, including the firefighter pay award agreed for 2022/23 and 2023/24.

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

The service has identified that in 2023/24, it can make £95,000 through savings and income generation opportunities. This includes savings from some contracts, the removal of some posts no longer needed and a small amount of additional rental income from its estate.

### **There are clear arrangements for accessing reserves**

The service doesn't hold reserves that aren't earmarked as it has access to Northumberland County Council's reserves for unforeseen events. There is a robust process for the service to access reserves if they are needed. For example, it has earmarked reserves to support its improvement plans and to offset future costs related to the court ruling in the ongoing firefighters' pension dispute.

### **The service reviews and manages its fleet and estate provision**

We were encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since our last inspection. The service's fleet and estate provision have clear links to its CRMP, which is supported by the fire support strategy. Working with Northumberland County Council and using the approach of 'invest to save', the service is using capital funding to enhance its response resources. For example, historically the service has relied on neighbouring fire and rescue services for the provision of an aerial ladder platform. This allows firefighters to work from height to assist in firefighting and perform effective rescue. Operational learning from a recent incident in the county highlighted that the service would benefit from its own aerial ladder platform to reduce reliance on other services. A refurbished aerial ladder platform has been sourced at a reduced cost to benefit the effectiveness and efficiency of the service. This has now gone through the procurement process, and a review of where it will be best located for response has taken place using historical incident and risk data.

Further work has taken place with the support of the council's BEST programme, which encourages collaboration activity. This collaboration has supported the service to buy software that allows it to monitor activity of fire engines in real time. This will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of how the service responds. At the time of our inspection, the service was negotiating a further purchase through the programme for LearnPro software, which will enable it to monitor and record staff competencies and all learning undertaken. This will further support learning and the maintenance of competencies throughout the organisation.

The service has collaborated with Northumbria Police, the mountain rescue team and members of the national partnership against rural crime to jointly purchase a 6x6 vehicle and a drone for use in response to wildfires.

Estates are managed effectively by the service's support team alongside Northumberland County Council. Together they have thought about how to improve the energy efficiency of the estate.

The service regularly reviews these strategies so that it can properly assess the effect any changes in fleet and estate provision, or future innovation, have on risk.

### **The service is improving its technology to support and improve efficiency**

We were encouraged to see the improvements that the service has made since our last inspection. The service actively considers how changes in technology and future innovation may affect risk. Since our last inspection, the service has implemented Microsoft 365, which gives access to software such as Power BI, a data visualisation tool. This will support staff with their use of data to manage risk.

It also seeks to exploit opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness presented by changes in technology. The recent introduction of the SafeLinks online referral process for SAWVs reduces the administration requirements on prevention staff and allows them to be active in the community to mitigate risk. Officers have now been issued with laptops to make sure they can access the service's systems while mobile.

The service has put in place the capacity and capability it needs to achieve sustainable transformation, and it routinely seeks opportunities to work with others to improve efficiency and provide better services in the future. It is working together with the county council to implement and develop an improved IT provision to benefit all employees. It has also secured funding to appoint a data graduate via the council's BEST programme. This role will support work to improve how data is collected and used throughout the organisation and to make sure that it is aligned with fire standards. A better understanding of its data will provide a more effective and efficient service overall.

### **The service's income generation is limited**

The service considers ways of generating extra income, but opportunities are limited. These include sharing its estates with other partner organisations and room hire at its private finance initiative buildings to generate some income. Delivery of the Prince's Trust programme and wildfire training are further sources of income for the service.

# Promoting the right values and culture

Good

Northumberland 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. Services should promote health and safety effectively, and staff should have access to a range of well-being support that can be tailored to their individual needs.

## Area for improvement

The service should assess the effectiveness of its occupational health unit to assure itself that staff benefit from a knowledgeable, supportive and accessible service.

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

## Main findings

### The service is making improvements to its values and culture

The service has well-defined values, which staff understand. We found that staff at all levels of the service showed behaviours that reflect service values. Recent changes in both the service's senior leadership team and the county council's leadership team have led to a committed focus on values and culture throughout the service. The service has implemented the [Core Code of Ethics](#) well within the newly created people strategy. Staff demonstrate this in their behaviours.

Staff told us there has been a change to the values in the service and that this has had a positive effect throughout the organisation. In our staff survey, 94 percent of respondents (119 out of 126) felt that they are treated with respect by the people they work with.

Senior leaders act as role models. For example, in our staff survey, 88 percent of respondents (106 out of 121) stated that service values are constantly modelled and maintained by service leaders.

There is a positive working culture throughout the service, with staff empowered and willing to challenge poor behaviours when they come across them. Staff survey results showed that 68 percent of respondents felt safe to challenge the way things are done. The service continues to provide channels for this feedback to improve. Since our last inspection, the service has introduced an 'open door policy' to allow easy access to senior leaders, along with other feedback processes such as 'fire away' to allow staff to take part in the drive for change. Fire away is a staff forum that allows for service improvements, idea sharing, positive challenge and direct access to senior leaders to enable open discussion.

### **Improvements have been made to the provision of well-being services to staff**

The service has well-understood and effective well-being policies in place, which are available to staff. A significant range of well-being support is available to support both physical and mental health.

There are good provisions in place to promote staff well-being. This includes a health and well-being portal that provides helpful information and signposts staff to local organisations that offer support with:

- seasonal well-being
- physical welfare
- alcohol misuse
- mindfulness
- financial well-being.

Further specialised support is also provided, such as access to psychological support from a fire service representative in Northumberland County Council, along with additional support from the [Fire Fighters Charity](#). In our staff survey, 88 percent of respondents (111 out of 126) said that they have access to services to support their mental well-being.

There are staff trained in [trauma risk management](#) available to support colleagues who have experienced a traumatic or potentially traumatic event. However, staff told us about occasions when they have asked for this support but didn't receive it.

The service should assure itself that these requests are accommodated and strengthened by further support for staff. The service is making plans to progress this. We look forward to seeing the effect of this in future inspections.

## **Occupational health provision needs to improve**

The service has access to an occupational health department through Northumberland County Council. This facility is available for all council employees. However, some staff told us that the occupational health unit has little understanding of fire service needs.

During our inspection, fire and rescue employees told us that the provision isn't adequate for an emergency service. They described a lack of communication, long delays and limited understanding of the role of a firefighter. Several staff members feel that some decision-making processes aren't suitable in relation to their roles. For example, when a firefighter has been removed from duty, the occupational health unit fails to consider fire ground tests to prove their fitness to return. As a result, the return to duty takes longer.

It is challenging for on-call staff who often work daytime hours in their primary roles to maintain contact with the occupational health unit. Inefficient communication is often the cause of this.

It is essential that the occupational health unit understands its role in rehabilitation and the return-to-work process of all staff in the service. It would benefit employees if occupational health provided a service more tailored to the needs of the organisation and its emergency response team.

## **The service has an improved health and safety process**

The service has effective and well-understood health and safety policies and procedures in place. Staff feel that since our last inspection, there has been a positive culture change around health and safety, including the appointment of a dedicated lead. However, better administrative support is needed for the health and safety function. The service recognises this and has taken appropriate action to provide support in this area.

The senior leadership team promote a 'no blame culture' to enhance the reporting of [near misses](#). Using safety flashes, the service communicates risk-critical information to all staff. A safety flash is a form of communication usually, via email, which informs staff of any significant change that may affect the workforce, such as faults in equipment. This process is overseen by the health and safety team and is monitored until it is resolved. To be assured of staff safety, the service still needs to do more to make sure that staff have read and understood all communications.

All policies and procedures are readily available, and the service promotes them effectively to all staff. The service prioritises the safety of its staff. The reintroduction of accredited health and safety qualifications reinforces the importance of safety throughout the organisation. The service now has 130 health-and-safety trained employees. This was evident in our staff survey results, which showed that

94 percent of staff (119 out of 126) felt they have the appropriate equipment to perform their roles safely.

The service monitors staff who have secondary employment or dual contracts to make sure they comply with the secondary employment policy and don't work excessive hours. Our 2021 inspection highlighted concerns about the management of dual contracts and staff who worked both on-call and wholetime in the service. Our inspection team returned to the service in March 2022 and was satisfied that this concern had been effectively resolved.

During this inspection, further review of secondary contracts showed that they are still effectively managed by the control department and are reviewed and assured by the senior leadership team.

### **Absence management is improving**

We found that there were clear processes in place to manage absences for all staff. There is clear guidance for managers, who are confident in using the process. The service manages absences well and in accordance with policy. Absence management is included as a core measure for the service and is overseen by the senior leadership team to monitor and enhance welfare and drive improvement. Northumberland County Council provides support for absence management. However, some staff told us that further training in this subject would be beneficial.

In 2021/22, the average number of days not worked per firefighter due to long-term sickness increased by 7 percent compared to 2020/21. Over the same period, the average number of days not worked per firefighter due to short-term sickness increased by 69 percent. There is still work to do in this area.

# Getting the right people with the right skills

## Good

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service is good at getting the right people with the right skills.

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

### Area for improvement

The service should assure itself that all staff receive the right training for their role.

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

### Main findings

#### Workforce planning has improved in the service

The service has good workforce planning in place. This makes sure skills and capabilities align with what it needs to effectively carry out its CRMP. For example, the service has created the training, assurance and safety team, which will produce the annual workforce development plan.

Workforce and succession planning is subject to scrutiny in the form of regular meetings to discuss requirements. The workforce plan is produced annually and analyses the service's needs along with the development requirements of individuals via the appraisal process.

Further work could be done to foresee gaps in staff levels. The service should assure itself that, where possible, vacancies are filled in a timely manner. Some teams are left understaffed and awaiting recruitment, which is affecting outstanding workloads.



## **The service needs to improve its workforce capabilities**

Some staff told us that they can access the training they need to be effective in their roles. And this isn't just focused on operational roles. The service's training plans make sure that it can maintain competence and capability effectively. The service was also able to demonstrate that staff are monitored effectively for risk-critical competencies, such as breathing apparatus use and incident command. All files reviewed throughout our inspection proved that staff are competent in these areas.

However, there are some areas of training that aren't formally carried out or recorded. During our inspection, staff told us that there are areas in which training on systems and processes could be improved. Some topics aren't routinely delivered. Examples include training in the community fire risk management information system, SSRI and HR topics, such as management skills and performance management. Additionally, the current recording method for training and feedback lacks capability across teams.

We were pleased to see that the service uses other ways to support staff. We welcome the implementation of 60 safe and well champions, video tutorials and routine notices to share information. However, for all staff to develop further, it is essential that training is provided formally and regularly on core departmental topics, systems and processes.

We understand the complexities and time constraints for on-call staff and the need for balance between operational learning and exercising. However, this shouldn't deter the service from providing consistent core training for all staff throughout the organisation.

## **The service is committed to improving learning**

The service promotes a culture of continuous improvement throughout the organisation, and it encourages staff to learn and develop. However, this isn't supported by current systems. Senior leaders have demonstrated their commitment to staff development by proposing to buy LearnPro software. This will provide, manage and record the competency process across the organisation. We look forward to seeing how this influences learning at our next inspection.

We were pleased to see that the service has a range of training resources in place. The service has implemented an operational assurance and learning framework in addition to its operational learning page on its internal website. It has full access to courses provided by Northumberland County Council, and staff can also access courses provided by the [Fire Brigades Union](#) to enhance learning. In our staff survey, 79 percent of respondents (100 out of 126) said that they are able to access the right learning and development opportunities.

# Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity

## Adequate

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

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

## Area for improvement

The service should make sure all staff understand the benefits of equality, diversity and inclusion and their role in promoting these values.

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

## Main findings

### The service actively seeks feedback and challenge

The service has developed several ways to work with staff on issues and decisions that affect them. This includes methods to build all-staff awareness of fairness and diversity as well as targeted initiatives to identify matters that affect different staff groups. The service uses several sources to interact with its employees including:

- staff surveys;
- the 'fire away' staff forum;
- community risk and response management meetings; and
- routine notices (information messages via its internal website).

The service also promotes an independent and confidential reporting line, Safecall, as an option for employees.

Of the respondents to our staff survey, 74 percent (93 out of 126) felt confident in the processes for providing feedback to all levels. However, only 67 percent (85 out of 126) felt that their suggestions would be listened to.

Our survey also showed that 86 percent (108 out of 126) of respondents felt that the service keeps them informed of changes that affect them. And staff have received these actions positively. Representative bodies and staff associations reported that the service interacts with them well. Structured meetings are in place to support communication, and the senior leadership team is developing the 'working together' document. This will build a secure framework around the relationships between the union and the senior leadership team. We look forward to seeing how future plans strengthen these professional relationships.

### **The service is improving its approach to bullying, harassment and discrimination**

Staff have a good understanding of what bullying, [harassment](#) and discrimination are and their negative effects on colleagues and the organisation.

Our survey found that over the past 12 months, 10 percent (12 out of 126) of staff felt they had been bullied or harassed and that 11 percent (14 out of 126) felt they had been discriminated against.

Most staff are confident in the service's approach to tackling bullying, harassment and discrimination as well as grievances and disciplinary matters. Recent changes in the senior leadership team have resulted in a targeted yet proportionate approach to such concerns. Staff told us this is being felt throughout the service as a positive change in culture. The service has made sure that all staff are trained and clear about what to do if they encounter inappropriate behaviour. As a result, staff feel confident to challenge unwanted behaviours and feel supported by management in doing so.

### **The service is improving its approach to diverse recruitment**

There is an open, fair and honest recruitment process for staff or those wishing to work for the service. The service has an effective system to understand and remove the risk of disproportionality in recruitment processes. For example, although all applications are online, accessible formats can be requested from the HR team. Each application is anonymised and coupled with an ethnic minority declaration form, which is removed from the application upon receipt. We saw an example where reasonable adjustments were made for a candidate at application stage and then throughout the process. This was received positively by the applicant.

The service has put considerable effort into developing its recruitment processes so that they are fair and potential applicants can understand them. Its recruitment policies are comprehensive and cover opportunities in all roles. The service advertises recruitment opportunities both internally and externally, using online sites, such as [Women in the Fire Service UK](#) and external recruitment specialists. The service would further benefit from using support networks such as the [Asian Fire Service Association](#) to specifically target those from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Recruitment vacancies are processed via Northumberland County Council. To maximise opportunities to diversify the workforce, it would be beneficial if the EDI lead had an overview of all recruitment.

The service has made some improvements to increase staff diversity at all levels of the organisation. Since our last inspection, targeted analysis has taken place throughout the county. This analysis of diversity data is refined to each station area. Carrying out activity to this level of detail will assure the service that it is implementing positive action effectively. However, to help drive improvements, the service needs to do more to understand the diversity of its existing workforce, including those staff members with [protected characteristics](#).

The proportion of firefighters from an ethnic minority background decreased from 2.7 percent (6 people) in 2020/21 to 1.9 percent (2 people) in 2021/22. The proportion of female firefighters increased from 7.5 percent (20 people) to 9.9 percent (28 people) over the same period, which is higher than the England rate of 8.2 percent.

For the whole workforce, in 2021/22, 2.9 percent were from an ethnic minority background compared to 3.6 percent in the local population and 8 percent throughout all fire and rescue services. And 18.5 percent were women, which is similar to the England average of 18.6 percent.

The service has taken some steps to improve diversity. For example, positive action days have taken place and recruitment campaigns are aligned with national awareness days.

### **The service has some work to do to improve EDI**

The service has improved its approach to EDI. It makes sure it can offer the right services to its communities and support staff with protected characteristics. For example, since our last inspection, the service has evidenced its commitment to EDI by seconding a dedicated strategic lead from another part of the service to provide further focus on the subject. As a result, the service has introduced a certified level 2 EDI qualification. At the time of our inspection, this was in a pilot phase and will trial three differing delivery methods. The service will evaluate the pilot to identify the most practical delivery, and this will be provided to all staff throughout the service.

Some awareness of the subject was demonstrated throughout our inspection. However, there was evidence that some staff weren't fully knowledgeable on EDI. Further understanding of aspects such as positive action and the benefits of EDI to the workplace would be beneficial.

The service is represented at network groups hosted by Northumberland County Council, which encompass:

- race equality
- mental well-being
- menopause
- LGBTQ+
- disability
- carers
- autism spectrum disorder
- armed forces
- apprentices
- female service staff.

The service should make sure it uses information gathered at the network groups to inform and drive activity.

It aims to further this work by the creation of a service neurodiversity steering group, using its own staff case studies as examples. Staff in the organisation have accessed neurodiversity education via courses provided by the Fire Brigades Union.

The service has a process in place to assess equality impact. It has introduced a new policy for equality impact assessments that is aligned with National Fire Chiefs Council standards. The policy states that an assessment will be completed for each new or reviewed policy, procedure or project. Training has been provided to managers throughout the organisation to reflect this. This is an ongoing project, and as a result, we saw some inconsistencies. For example, we found some policies that didn't have completed equality impact assessments when they should. The service should prioritise its policies and make sure that assessments are undertaken to fully understand the potential for negative effects.

# Managing performance and developing leaders

## Adequate

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service is adequate at managing performance and developing leaders.

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

### Areas for improvement

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

The service should put in place an open and fair process to identify, develop and support high-potential staff and aspiring leaders.

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

### Main findings

#### **The service should do more to manage individual performance**

The service has an inconsistent process in place for performance and development. Not all staff have specific and individual objectives or have had their performance assessed in the past year.

Staff don't always think the system is fair. For example, we were told that the process is inconsistent and not all staff have completed personal appraisals. Reasons given were that other work is prioritised above the appraisal process.

Staff also reported that often group appraisals are carried out for on-call staff, as opposed to individual appraisals. This doesn't allow for open or individual discussion to take place about personal development.

The service's appraisal process isn't delivered with consistency, and varying approaches to appraisals are taken. The service should aim to formalise performance monitoring and training that supports managers to carry out appraisals effectively and consistently.

### **The service is improving its approach to development and promotion**

The service has put considerable effort into developing its promotion and progression processes so that they are fair and all staff can understand them. The service's promotion process mirrors the recruitment process to allow opportunities for all staff to progress. Since our last inspection, there has been a notable policy change to allow the transfer of on-call staff to whole-time positions. We were pleased to see that this is making significant progress. However, when these promotions are approved, it is paramount that the service supports staff in their training and exposure to commanding incidents during this progression phase.

Since our last inspection, the service has developed the 'talent management portfolio'. This 12-month plan allows successful applicants to acquire the necessary management skills for their new roles. The targeted development plan includes some certified qualifications in subjects such as:

- health and safety
- diversity and inclusion
- organisational effectiveness
- absence management
- service delivery
- personal impact
- outstanding leadership
- personal development planning.

Mentoring and coaching opportunities are also made available to enhance skills.

During our inspection, the service's first development candidates were due to complete their talent management portfolios. A full evaluation will take place to assess the effectiveness of the talent management portfolio process.

### **The service should do more to develop leadership and high-potential roles**

The service needs to improve the way it actively manages the career pathways of staff, including those with specialist skills and those with potential for leadership roles.

The service should consider putting in place more formal arrangements to identify and support members of staff to become senior leaders. There is a gap in its succession planning.

Our last inspection highlighted a need for the service to put in place an open and fair process to identify, develop and support high-potential staff and aspiring leaders. During this inspection, we found that it needed to do more to make sure that Fire Standards Board fire standards [leading the service](#) and [leading and developing people](#) (December 2022) are effectively implemented.

The service was able to evidence a draft policy on its imminent 'talent and succession planner'. However, senior leaders feel that key management development skills are established prior to succession planning via the talent management portfolio process.

However, the service hasn't made enough progress in developing leaders and high-potential staff, so this area for improvement will remain. We look forward to seeing the progress made in the newly implemented portfolios and the effect they have on the progression and development of staff in the organisation.

### **The service needs to improve diversity in leadership**

The service needs to encourage applicants from diverse backgrounds into middle and senior-level positions. The service advertises and fills these positions internally and externally. However, it should continue to explore opportunities to make its workforce more representative.



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