



Fire & Rescue Service 2023–25

Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of Essex County Fire and Rescue Service

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Changes to this round of inspection

We last inspected Essex County Fire and Rescue Service in September 2021. And in July 2022, we published our inspection report with our findings on the service's effectiveness and efficiency and how well it looks after its people. We followed this up with a re-inspection in January 2023 to specifically consider the [cause of concern](#) for protection and published our findings in February 2023.

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

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

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

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

This report sets out our inspection findings for Essex County 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 Essex County Fire and Rescue Service has performed in 11 areas. We have made the following graded judgments:

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

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

HMI summary

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

I am satisfied with some aspects of the performance of Essex County Fire and Rescue Service in keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks. However, there are areas in which the service needs to improve. For example, it needs to make sure its strategies allow the most appropriate response to incidents in line with its [integrated risk management plan \(IRMP\)](#). And it needs to improve the availability of its fire engines to make sure it can respond better to incidents. It also needs to make sure its staff are appropriately trained in risk-critical skills to support its response to incidents.

I am encouraged that the service has continued to make progress since our last full inspection in September 2021. For example, it is now focusing its prevention work on those that need it the most, and it continues to work well with partner organisations. It has also made enough progress with its protection work for us to remove the cause of concern that we previously raised. We recognise the service's hard work to improve this important function.

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

- The service knows the risks it faces and makes good use of data to inform its analysis of risk.
- The service needs to make sure its response strategy allows the most appropriate response for the public in line with its IRMP.
- The service's culture continues to improve, but there is still more work to do.

During our inspection, we found that work for a new [community risk management plan \(CRMP\)](#) for 2025 was underway. We look forward to seeing this next time we inspect.

We recognise the service is working to improve its culture. It has made a lot of progress in recent years. This must continue.



Roy Wilsher

HM Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Service in numbers



Profile

	Essex	England
Area Square miles	1,417	50,370
Population (thousands) 30 June 2021	1,863	56,536
Population density Thousands per square mile	1.3	1.1



Response

Incidents attended per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2023	9.5	11.0
Home fire safety checks carried out by fire and rescue service per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2023	4.4	9.4
Fire safety audits per 100 known premises Year ending 31 March 2023	2.3	2.0
Availability of wholetime pumps Year ending 31 March 2023	98.4%	
Availability of on-call pumps Year ending 31 March 2023	65.1%	

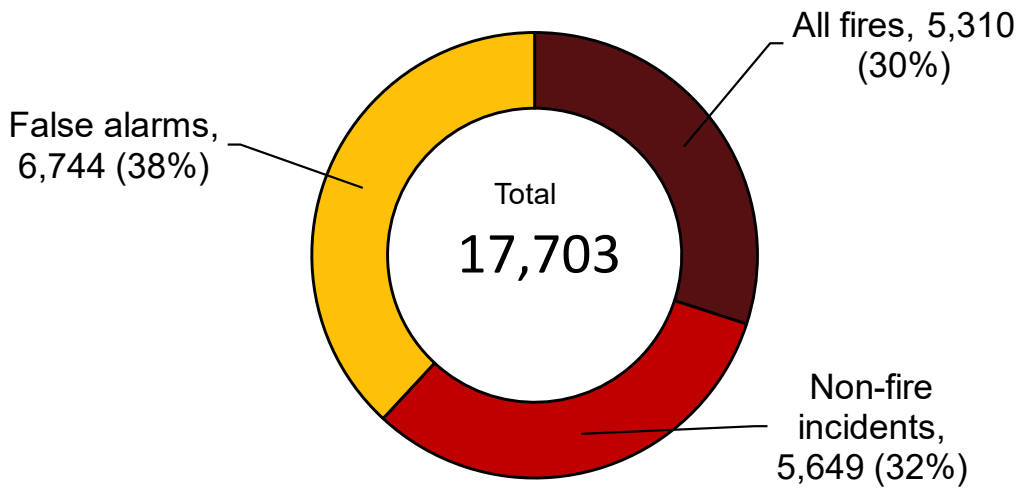


Cost

Funding Year ending 31 March 2022	£75.4m	£2.5bn
Expenditure per population Year ending 31 March 2022	£42.52	£41.88



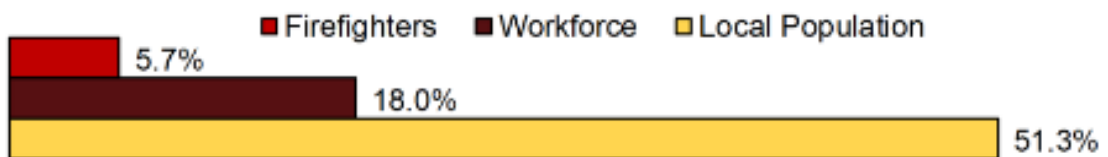
Incidents attended in year ending 31 March 2023



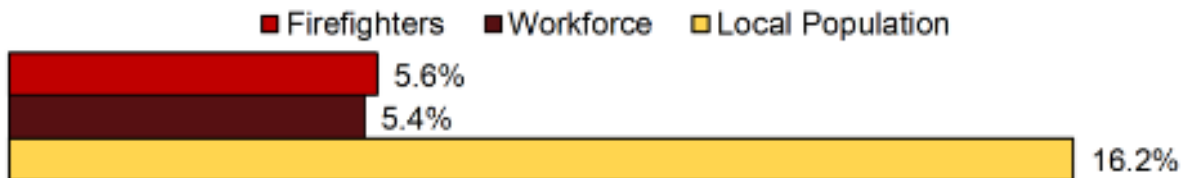
Workforce

	Essex	England
Five-year change in total workforce 2017 to 2022	7.4%	0.2%
Number of firefighters per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2022	0.63	0.62
Percentage of firefighters who are wholetime Year ending 31 March 2022	54.7%	65.2%

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



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



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

Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies

Good

Essex County Fire and Rescue Service is good at understanding risk.

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

Area for improvement

The service should ensure it gathers and records relevant and up-to-date risk information.

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

Main findings

The service knows the risks it faces and consults with the public

For the period 2020–2024, the service assessed a suitable range of risks and threats using a thorough integrated 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. The service is developing a CRMP, which is due to be published in 2025. It continues to show good use of all available data, including working well with partner organisations such as local authorities, NHS trusts and other emergency services, to understand current, future and emerging risks.

When appropriate, the service has consulted and held constructive talks with its communities and other relevant parties to understand risk and explain how it intends to reduce it. The service told us that its CRMP will be prepared for public consultation in line with the [Gunning Principles](#), which is a method of demonstrating legitimate public consultation.

The service has an effective IRMP

Once it has assessed risks, the service records its findings in an easily understood IRMP. This plan describes how the service intends to use its prevention, protection and response activities to reduce the risks and threats the community faces, both now and in the future.

The new CRMP that the service plans to publish in 2025 will replace the current IRMP. We found evidence of thorough planning for the new CRMP, and the service has clearly set out its intentions.

Risk information should be accurate and up to date

As we found in our last inspection, the service routinely collects and records risk information about people, places and threats it has identified as presenting the highest risk. It has established processes and systems to gather site-specific risk information. However, the service could do more to make that information readily available to all staff who need it, including those in prevention and protection. This would allow the service to identify, reduce and mitigate risk more effectively.

We sampled a broad range of the risk information the service collects, and again we found that some records weren't accurate. Therefore, the area for improvement relating to this from our last inspection remains.

Where appropriate, the service passes risk information to other organisations, such as the police, health and social services and local authorities.

Staff at the locations we visited, including firefighters and emergency control room staff, were able to show us that they could access, use and share risk information quickly to help them resolve incidents safely.

The service builds its understanding of risk using data from operational activity

The service communicates risk information 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 is using data from operational activity to support modelling and scenario planning to create its new CRMP.

Preventing fires and other risks

Good

Essex County 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 has increased activity to implement its prevention strategy

The service has clearly linked its prevention strategy to the risks it has identified in its IRMP. The service has improved the way that it implements its prevention activity and is now making better use of its resources to carry out this work. Therefore, the area for improvement relating to this from our last inspection has been closed. We are interested to see how the service develops its prevention strategy with the introduction of its new CRMP in 2025.

The service's teams work well together and with other relevant organisations on prevention, and they share relevant information when needed. In the year ending 31 March 2023, the service carried out 1,351 prevention visits as a result of referrals from other agencies.

The service uses information to adjust its planning assumptions and direct activity between its prevention, protection and response functions. For example, the prevention strategy is aligned with the service's annual plan. Prevention activities are considered core work within the service, and they are carried out by a range of staff.

The service has improved the targeting of its prevention activity

The service uses a risk-based approach to prioritise people most at risk from fire and other emergencies in its prevention activity. For example, the service takes a person-centred approach to identifying those most vulnerable. Risk is identified by the service and categorised into gold, silver and bronze levels. This allows it to prioritise the time it takes to respond to each person.

It uses a range of information and data to target its prevention activity at vulnerable people and groups. For example, the service uses an accidental [dwelling fires](#) risk-based targeting model. The model has been developed with the [Essex Centre of Data Analytics](#) and is based on multiple relevant datasets.

The service carries out a range of interventions, which it adapts to the level of risk in its communities. It communicates information about prevention to the public well and proactively looks for harder-to-reach communities.

Staff in the central prevention team are skilled and confident in carrying out safe and well visits

Well-trained officers in the central prevention team have the right skills and confidence to carry out [safe and well visits](#). These visits cover a suitable range of hazards that can put vulnerable people at greater risk from fire and other emergencies. The service is now making better use of operational crews, including [on-call](#) firefighters, to carry out prevention activities. This includes carrying out [home fire safety checks](#) for lower-risk people. Firefighters can refer higher-risk people for further support.

The service responds well to safeguarding concerns

Staff we interviewed told us about occasions when they had noticed [safeguarding](#) problems. They told us that they feel confident and trained to act appropriately and promptly. The service's approach to safeguarding and vulnerability is effective, and the area for improvement relating to this from our last inspection has been closed. Since our last inspection, it is clear that staff knowledge and understanding have increased, including how to make referrals for those who are most vulnerable. The service has a wealth of safeguarding guidance and information for staff on its intranet.

The service has thorough policies for safeguarding and resources it well. There is 24-hour support in place for referrals to be made. It has effective partnerships with other organisations, such as members of local safeguarding boards. The service is at the forefront of safeguarding work in fire and rescue services through providing the national strategic lead to the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#).

The service collaborates well with others to reduce the number of fires and other risks

The service works with a wide range of other organisations to prevent fires and other emergencies. At the time of inspection, the service told us that it had 143 formal partnerships, which it regularly reviews.

We found good evidence that it routinely refers people at greatest risk to organisations that may better meet their needs, such as adult social care. There are established referral pathways in place, and these are consistently used. Arrangements are also in place to receive referrals from others through the home fire safety information team. These include the [Alzheimer's Society](#), NHS trusts, the [Essex Wellbeing Service](#) and emergency service partners. There is a referral template that partners use, and the service acts appropriately on the referrals it receives. For example, we heard from partners about the service taking part in joint agency visits to vulnerable people.

The service routinely exchanges information with other public sector organisations about people and groups at greatest risk. It uses this information to challenge planning assumptions and target prevention activity. For example, through working with partners, it uses information from a wide range of sources, such as social care and the accidental dwelling fires model, to allocate resources to the risks it has identified.

The service tackles 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. This includes having trained staff who educate young people through a 'junior fire setters' initiative. Some firefighters inform local schools and support them in working with individuals who are fire setting.

When appropriate, it routinely shares information with relevant organisations to support the prosecution of arsonists. This includes working with the police, probation service and local authorities. The service also makes good use of a fire-stoppers scheme to gather and share information from the public to support prosecutions.

Evaluation of prevention work has improved

The service has improved how it evaluates prevention work, and the area for improvement relating to this from our last inspection has been closed. It has good tools in place to measure how effective its activity is and to make sure all sections of its communities get appropriate access to the prevention services that meet their needs. The service has reviewed and improved many of the activities that it provides to the public through evaluation, such as safe and well visits, education in schools and road safety work. It has also committed to using the outcomes of its evaluation of prevention work to inform the development of its new CRMP.

Prevention activities take account of feedback from the public, other organisations and other parts of the service. For example, the service has assured itself of the content of its education packages through feedback from students and teachers. Following its evaluation, it has also taken the opportunity to improve the training of its own staff in specific subjects such as dementia awareness and signs of abuse.

The service uses feedback to inform its planning assumptions and change future activity so that it focuses on what the community needs and what works. The service makes good use of an analyst and evaluation officer to monitor performance and review how effective its activities are. Evaluation is in line with the [prevention fire standard](#).

Protecting the public through fire regulation

Requires improvement

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

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

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure that its quality assurance process is effective so staff carry out audits to an appropriate standard and they are accurately recorded.

The service should assure itself that its use of enforcement powers prioritises the highest risks and includes proportionate activity to reduce risk.

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

Main findings

The service has a protection strategy linked to its IRMP

The service's protection strategy is clearly linked to the risks it has identified in its IRMP. It is reviewing its current strategy in line with the development of its new CRMP.

Staff across the service are involved in protection activities, and when needed, they feed back information effectively. For example, operational crews carry out fire safety visits at lower-risk premises and refer them to specialist fire safety officers when they need to. The service then uses information from these visits to adjust planning assumptions and direct activity.

The service has set itself an achievable RBIP

During our round one and two inspections, we raised a cause of concern for protection as the service had insufficient resources to meet its RBIP. It wasn't achieving its own targets for the number of audits it needed to do. The service has now set itself an achievable RBIP, which is informed by local risk information. It is based on an improved dataset, which the service is continuing to update. It has shown better planning of its workforce to meet the demands of its protection strategy. Therefore, the previous cause of concern has been closed.

The service's RBIP is focused on its understanding of its highest-risk buildings. It has a three-year programme to inspect very high-risk premises and a five-year programme to inspect high-risk premises. We found evidence of detailed monitoring and performance management of the protection function. And the service makes good use of data to track progress.

We will continue to review the success of the RBIP's outcomes through liaison with the service and our future inspection activity. The service should continue to assure itself that audits are being completed in the time frames it has set.

Workforce planning and resourcing of protection work has improved

Since our last inspection, the service has improved its workforce planning and its understanding of the resources required to meet its protection strategy.

The service is increasing the number of qualified protection staff to meet the requirements of its RBIP. The service told us that it has recruited to fill 23.8 full-time equivalent protection posts, of which 17.5 must be inspecting officers. The service currently has 14.8 full-time equivalent qualified level 4 inspectors with others working towards qualifications and competency. This will help it 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 quality of audits and the information being recorded are 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 RBIP;
- 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. For example, there were inconsistencies in the way that audits are followed up and how enforcement action is recorded and carried out.

The service should make sure it makes all relevant information from the audits available to operational teams and control room operators.

The service should make sure that all of its records are accurate

The service has a new quality assurance policy for protection that is aligned with the service's overall assurance framework. It carries out quality assurance of its protection activities, but we found inconsistencies in the records that we checked. The service told us that it is aware of the inconsistencies, and the new quality assurance process is helping it to resolve this. The service should make sure that its quality assurance process is effective so staff carry out audits to an appropriate standard and record them accurately.

It has some evaluation tools in place to measure how effective its activity is and to make sure all sections of its communities can access the protection services that meet their needs. This includes a pre and post-visit questionnaire that the service uses to better understand the communities it serves and the quality of the service it provides.

The service should make sure that its use of enforcement powers is proportionate and effective

The service doesn't use its full range of enforcement powers consistently. We found that it didn't always take appropriate opportunities for enforcement action against those who don't comply with fire safety regulations. We also found inconsistencies in the way enforcement action was applied and how the enforcement management model was used.

In the year ending 31 March 2023, the service issued 0 alteration notices, 677 informal notifications, 4 enforcement notices, 5 prohibition notices and carried out 2 prosecutions.

The service should assure itself that its use of enforcement powers prioritises the highest risks and includes proportionate activity to reduce risk.

The service could work more effectively with other enforcement agencies

The service works with other enforcement agencies, such as local authorities, to regulate fire safety, but it does so inconsistently. It doesn't routinely exchange risk information with them. Staff gave us examples of where the service could be more effective by doing this, such as routinely sharing information with the [Care Quality Commission](#) on care homes.

The service should continue to make sure it adapts to new legislation

Since our last inspection, the [Building Safety Act 2022](#) and the [Fire Safety Regulations 2022](#) have been introduced to better regulate and manage tall buildings.

The service has predicted greater demands on its protection team. It has included this in its planning assumptions for recruiting extra staff. It expects these arrangements to have a manageable effect on its other protection activity.

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

The service should make sure that it has good arrangements in place to receive this information. It should then use it to update the risk information it gives its operational staff.

The service responds promptly to most building consultations

The service responds to most building consultations on time. This means it consistently meets its statutory responsibility to comment on fire safety arrangements at new and altered buildings. In 2022/23, the service responded to 96 percent of all building consultations received within 15 days.

To improve its response to building consultations, the service is allocating more resources and increasing its development for staff.

The service has a new strategy for working with businesses

The service has set out a new strategy for how it proactively works with local businesses and other organisations to promote compliance with fire safety legislation. It has recently recruited two more people to support the development of detailed plans to implement the strategy. Therefore, the area for improvement relating to this from our last inspection has been closed.

The service is attending fewer unwanted fire signals

An effective risk-based approach is in place to manage the number of unwanted fire signals. The service has introduced call filtering to reduce the number of unwanted fire signals that it attends. In 2022/23, it didn't attend 36.5 percent of automatic fire alarms, compared to 0.05 percent in 2021/22. Fewer unwanted calls mean fire engines are available to respond to a genuine incident rather than responding to a false one. It also reduces the risk to the public if fewer fire engines travel at high speed on the roads.

There is still more that the protection team can do to tackle repeated unwanted fire signals, such as working closer with local businesses.

Responding to fires and other emergencies

Requires improvement

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

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

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure its response strategy provides the most appropriate response for the public in line with its [integrated risk management plan](#).

The service should improve the availability of its fire engines to make sure it can respond better to incidents.

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

Main findings

The service needs to make sure resources are well aligned with risk

The service's response strategy isn't clearly aligned with the risks it has identified in its IRMP. The effectiveness of its strategy is hindered in part by the decreased availability of some fire engines and the lack of some risk-critical skills.

The service has been mobilising fire engines to emergency incidents with firefighters who aren't competent in the use of breathing apparatus. This presents a potential risk to the public and firefighters. The service told us that between its new mobilising policy going live on 27 June 2023 and 6 November 2023, there were 393 mobilisations to incidents where crews were deficient in breathing apparatus. This accounts for 3.3 percent of total incidents. Of the 393 mobilisations, 92 were to incidents where breathing apparatus may have been required, as defined in the service's mobilising policy. The service told us that it mitigates this risk by assigning an additional fire engine with breathing apparatus capability so that a safe system of work can be applied. The service told us that by the end of March 2024, all firefighters will be trained.

The service actively manages its fire cover. In 2019, it carried out modelling with external consultants to identify what it considers to be its core station locations where fire cover is prioritised over its non-core stations, based on risk. The service has set up a new team called the resource management unit, and it is implementing a new workforce management system in early 2024.

The service has done some work to better understand the locations of its fire stations, but it couldn't always explain the rationale for the location of all its fire engines, response staff and working patterns. It told us that it is currently carrying out scenario planning and risk modelling as part of the process for developing its new CRMP, which is due in 2025. The service must take this opportunity to make sure that its response strategy allows the most appropriate response for the public in line with its risk management planning. The area for improvement relating to this from our last inspection remains, and we will review progress through liaison with the service.

The service isn't meeting its own response standards

There are no national response standards of fire and rescue services' performance for the public. But the service has set out its own response standards in its IRMP. Its current response standards are:

- to attend 90 percent of all operational incidents within 15 minutes; and
- to attend all potentially life-threatening calls in an average of ten minutes or less.

The service doesn't meet its own standards.

In 2022/23, the service told us it attended 82 percent of all operational incidents within 15 minutes. In 2020/21, this was 86 percent.

The service told us that in the year ending 31 March 2023, its average response time to potentially life-threatening calls was 10 minutes and 50 seconds. Between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021, it was an average of 10 minutes and 23 seconds.

Home Office data shows that in the year ending 31 March 2023, the service's response time to primary fires was 10 minutes and 30 seconds, which is in line with the average for significantly rural services in England.

In our last inspection, we found that the service's mobilising system wasn't performing as well as it should. This was affecting the service's response to some incidents. In June 2023, the service changed to a new mobilising system. It told us that the new system will stop these problems from happening again.

The availability of some fire engines is deteriorating

We looked at the number of fire engines that had a monthly availability below 60 percent for three of the last four years. This showed that availability has declined each year. (We excluded 2020/21 as data was significantly different across the country due to the pandemic.)

- In 2019/20, the average number of fire engines with availability below 60 percent for a month was 10.
- In 2021/22, the average number of fire engines with availability below 60 percent for a month was 15.
- In 2022/23, the average number of fire engines with availability below 60 percent for a month was 19.

The service should improve the availability of its fire engines to make sure it can respond better to incidents in line with its IRMP.

Staff understand how to command incidents safely

The service has trained incident commanders, who are assessed regularly and properly. This includes command assessments for control staff. It 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 \(JESIP\)](#).

Control staff are more integrated with service activities

We were pleased to see that the service's control staff are more involved with its command, training, exercise, debrief and assurance activity. Control staff have command training and are regularly assessed. The knowledge and skills of supervisory managers in control are subject to a verification process.

Control staff told us of incident debriefs that they had contributed to. They were able to explain the debrief process to us and gave recent examples where they had produced written feedback and attended in person.

While there are opportunities to participate in exercises, there is still no formal programme for control staff.

Staff can easily access risk information

We sampled a range of risk information, such as short and long-term records, the information in place for firefighters responding to incidents at high-risk, high-rise buildings and the information held by [fire control](#).

Most of the information we reviewed was up to date and detailed. This included site-specific risk information being reviewed within the service's target of 12 months. Staff could easily access and understand it. However, we found some inconsistencies between the information created by the protection team and that available to firefighters. This included premises with [aluminium composite material](#) cladding that were part of the building risk review in 2021. We made the service aware of this at the time of our inspection, and it has since told us that this has been addressed.

Since our last inspection, the service has made sure that firefighters can access cross-border risk information for all neighbouring fire and rescue services. Information is available up to 5 km over the border for the London Fire Brigade and up to 10 km over the border for other services. The previous area for improvement relating to cross-border risk information has been closed.

The service evaluates operational performance

As part of this inspection, we reviewed a range of emergency incidents and training events. The service has robust policies for evaluating operational performance and has a formal assurance framework.

The service mostly 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. Staff from across the service are involved in the debrief process, including the communications team. And it exchanges this information with appropriate organisations, such as the police.

The service learns from incidents to improve its service for the public. We were given several examples from different incident types. However, we found that some debriefs weren't as thorough as they could be, and some relevant people weren't contributing. The service should make sure that its policies are consistently being applied to learn as much as it can.

We were encouraged to see that the service is learning from other fire and rescue services or operational learning gathered from emergency service partners. The service was able to give us a range of examples, including inquiries about major incidents around the country.

The service hasn't yet fully implemented national operational guidance

The service hasn't yet completed the full implementation of [national operational guidance](#). The work has progressed since our last inspection but hasn't met the deadline that was previously set. This is disappointing considering the national programme was completed in 2018.

The service keeps the public informed of incidents

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 having an out-of-hours team that is informed by control should information need communicating. There are procedures with other agencies for joint communications with the public.

Responding to major and multi-agency incidents

Adequate

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

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

Areas for improvement

The service should ensure that its procedures for responding to terrorist-related incidents are understood by all staff and are well tested.

The service should make sure it participates in a programme of cross-border exercises, sharing the learning from these exercises.

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.

It is also familiar with the significant risks neighbouring fire and rescue services may face, and which it might reasonably be asked to respond to in an emergency. These include short-term risks such as temporary local events.

Firefighters have access to risk information from neighbouring services on [mobile data terminals](#). The service has made sure this is available to all staff who need it.

Staff need to be more familiar with the procedures for responding to major and multi-agency incidents

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

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

We found that the service had well-developed policies and procedures in place for safely managing this type of incident. We found evidence that procedures have been developed by learning from other services and that multi-agency communications are regularly tested.

At this type of incident, a fire and rescue service would receive a high volume of simultaneous fire calls. We found that the systems in place in the service were robust enough to receive and manage this volume of calls. Staff in the emergency control room and at the incident command unit can share, view and update the actions that result from the individual fire calls.

The service has carried out realistic training and exercising at tall buildings. But this training and exercising hasn't included all staff that would be expected to respond to an incident of this nature. We found during our inspection that some firefighters and incident commanders weren't familiar enough with the service's procedures, particularly in the earlier phases of an incident. The process for viewing and updating information at the bridgehead (the position where firefighters are carrying out firefighting operations) wasn't clear to all staff, and there have been delays in setting this up.

We also inspected the arrangements for responding to other types of major and multi-agency incidents, including marauding terrorist attacks. We found that thorough procedures were in place and that the service provided training for both its specialist and non-specialist responders. But it could do more to make sure that all staff understand the procedures and are able to attend exercises. In 2022/23, the service carried out 35.12 multi-agency exercises per 1,000 firefighters compared to a national average of 43.49. Therefore, the area for improvement relating to this from our last inspection remains.

The service works well with other fire and rescue services

The service supports other fire and rescue services responding to emergency incidents. It is interoperable with these services and can form part of a multi-agency response.

The service has successfully deployed to other services, including high-volume pumps and tactical advisers. The process for requesting [national resilience assets](#) is well understood by staff.

Not all staff have opportunities to participate in 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. We were encouraged to see that the service uses feedback from these exercises to inform risk information and service plans. We were encouraged that in 2022/23, the service participated in 27 exercises with neighbouring fire and rescue services. This is 25.63 exercises per 1,000 firefighters, compared to a national average of 23.89.

However, 58 percent of respondents to our staff survey (76 out of 132) said that they hadn't trained at all with other fire and rescue services. Staff also told us during the inspection that they don't get the chance to train with other fire and rescue services as much as they feel they should. Therefore, the area for improvement relating to this from our last inspection remains.

Staff are trained in and familiar with JESIP

The incident commanders we interviewed had been trained in and were familiar with JESIP.

The service could give us strong evidence that it consistently follows these principles. This includes in the control room where the staff we spoke to were familiar with them.

We sampled a range of debriefs the service had carried out after multi-agency incidents and/or exercises. We were encouraged to find that the service was identifying any problems it had with applying JESIP and took appropriate, prompt action with other emergency services. The service is a key member of the [Essex Resilience Forum](#), and organisational learning is effectively shared.

The service works well with other partners

The service has good arrangements in place to respond to emergencies with partners that make up the Essex Resilience Forum. These arrangements include jointly chairing the forum with the police.

The service is a valued partner and hosts the forum at its headquarters. An executive programme board meets quarterly, and the service is involved in several working groups, such as planning and assurance and JESIP senior leaders. It also chairs the risk intelligence group. The service takes part in training events with other members of the [local resilience forum](#) and uses the learning to develop planning assumptions about responding to major and multi-agency incidents. Examples of recent multi-agency training events include those at high-rise buildings, an airport and [COMAH sites](#).

The service uses national learning

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

Making best use of resources

Requires improvement

Essex County Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at making best use of its resources.

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

The service's revenue budget for 2023/24 is £88.4m. This is a 7.6 percent increase from the previous financial year.

Areas for improvement

The service needs to show a clear rationale for the resources allocated between prevention, protection and response activities. This should be linked to risks and priorities set out in its [integrated risk management plan](#).

The service should assure itself that its workforce is productive.

The service should assure itself that it makes the most of collaboration opportunities and that they are value for money.

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 plans are more consistent with its risks and priorities, but it needs to make sure its response model is efficient

We were encouraged to see the improvements the service has made to align its plans since our last inspection. The service's financial and workforce plans are more consistent with the risks and priorities identified in its IRMP. The service makes good use of an annual plan to manage its priorities and set objectives for the year. This includes an end-of-year review of progress.

The service can better show how it uses some of its resources. This includes how it has allocated the resources it needs in the protection team and how it makes better use of firefighters to carry out prevention work. But there is still work for the service to do to make sure that its response strategy and workforce model are as effective and efficient as they could be.

The service has made some savings from changing four stations from [day crewing](#) to on-call, but it hasn't fully evaluated its mix of crewing and duty systems. It hasn't analysed its response cover well enough and can't show it deploys its fire engines and response staff to manage risk efficiently. The service could do more to understand the cost of managing its response, including the use of strategic locations, and fully analyse the cost of its on-call duty system. Therefore, the area for improvement relating to this from our last inspection remains.

Preparation for the next CRMP in 2025 is underway, and we found evidence of thorough planning. We look forward to seeing the outcomes of this work.

Financial plans are built on sound scenarios

The service builds its financial plans on sound scenarios. They help make sure it is sustainable and underpinned by financial controls that reduce the risk of misusing public money. Since our last inspection, the service has developed a clearer understanding of its financial priorities, and managers show a better understanding of financial decision-making. It makes good use of a dashboard to monitor budgets.

The service can't be sure that its workforce is as productive as it could be

We found evidence of the service improving how it manages performance. This includes a continuous improvement board and a productivity and efficiency board, but the service needs to do more to improve the productivity of its workforce. There is no process in place to understand how productive its control staff are.

The service doesn't understand well enough how it uses its [wholetime](#) firefighters. It has reviewed and updated its station planning in line with other plans and set targets. However, it doesn't consider well enough how firefighters spend their time across day and night shifts. It can't be sure that it is making the most of its capacity. Increased movements of fire engines due to standbys at other locations have affected productivity.

The service should do more to make sure its workforce is as productive as possible. This includes reviewing existing ways of working and considering new methods. Therefore, the area for improvement relating to this from our last inspection remains.

We were told that the service relies heavily on overtime. The service should consider if this is the best way to manage its resources.

Collaboration is producing some benefits

We were pleased to see that the service meets its statutory duty to collaborate. It routinely considers opportunities to collaborate with other emergency responders. For example, [Essex Police](#) and the [East of England Ambulance Service](#) make good use of bases at fire and rescue service premises.

Collaborative work aligns with the priorities in the service's IRMP, including through its estates and fleet strategies. The joint workshop facility with Essex Police was due to reach the final stages of planning by the end of 2023. The service is also establishing a new community welfare position in collaboration with the ambulance service.

Collaboration generates some savings, but the service could achieve more. There are significant collaborative schemes planned in the capital programme, but those savings haven't yet been realised. Therefore, the area for improvement relating to this from our last inspection remains.

The service has good continuity arrangements

The service has good continuity arrangements in place for areas in which it considers threats and risks to be high. It regularly reviews and tests these threats and risks so that staff know the arrangements and their associated responsibilities. In 2023, the service was able to use its continuity arrangements to provide training because of unforeseen staff absence.

The service has appropriate business continuity plans for industrial action. It has assured itself and can show that it has adequate resources available for future periods of industrial action. In early 2023, it made detailed plans in preparation for potential industrial action. It used exercises to test its plans, which resulted in some useful findings.

Control has its own business continuity arrangements, which staff understand and test. These include plans for when the availability of fire engines or other resources is significantly reduced due to exceptional circumstances.

The service is showing better financial management

We were encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since our last inspection.

There are regular reviews to consider all the service's spending, including its non-pay costs. This scrutiny makes sure the service gets value for money. For example, the service has a productivity and efficiency board to track cashable and non-cashable savings and efficiencies. It also carries out value-for-money [benchmarking](#). Therefore, the area for improvement relating to this from our last inspection has been closed.

The service has plans to make savings and efficiencies, such as through its fire station modernisation programme and new training facility. It anticipates that this will improve its operational performance and the service it gives the public. It is improving its understanding and use of benefits and impact analyses, including through its capital programme of work.

The service is taking steps to achieve efficiency gains through sound financial management and best working practices. It is doing this in important areas such as estates, fleet and procurement. We found that its estates and fleet strategies were detailed, ambitious and linked to other service plans. There is clear strategic oversight and monitoring of plans. Procurement has been centralised since our last inspection. The service makes good use of purchasing frameworks, and it compares costs with other services.

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

Good

Essex County 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 likely financial challenges

We were encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since our last inspection. The service has developed a good understanding of future financial challenges, and the area for improvement relating to this from our last inspection has been closed.

When we last inspected, the service anticipated a budget shortfall of £4m by 2025. The financial position has improved. Although the service anticipates a budget shortfall of around £0.6m in 2023/24, this is due to the higher-than-anticipated pay awards. The planning assumption of a 3 percent council tax precept increase in 2024/25 and 2025/26 results in an almost balanced budget in future years.

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

The service's 2023/24 budget includes over £1m of identified savings. The service plans to develop other savings options as part of its reduction of financial risks. It also has earmarked reserves, which can be used to manage the higher-than-anticipated pay awards.

The service is making better use of reserves

We were encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since our last inspection, and we have closed the previous area for improvement relating to the use of reserves.

The service has a sensible and sustainable plan for using its reserves. The general reserve is set at around £3m, which represents just over 3 percent of its annual revenue budget. The service is now using its capital receipts reserve to fund its capital programme. As of March 2023, it held a capital receipt reserve of over £13m, with all but £2m allocated to new capital expenditure, such as training facilities and investment in technology.

Although the budget deficit in 2022/23 was partially due to the higher-than-anticipated pay awards, reserves were also used to cover an overspend relating to the on-call duty system.

Fleet and estates strategies support future service provision

The service's estate and fleet strategies have clear links to its IRMP. There are detailed strategies for both, with clear governance arrangements and a robust approach to managing them. The service makes good use of a strategic assets management plan. Both strategies use opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness. For example, the service reviewed the lifespans of its vehicles and has extended how long some vehicles will be used.

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

The service has ambitious estates projects, such as a new training facility, station upgrades and joint workshops with the police. Planning has progressed since our last inspection.

It is clear that some fire stations need repair or updating. Staff reported multiple issues to us. The service is tackling this through a programme of work to modernise its fire stations. It expects the work to take around seven years to complete, and it is being prioritised based on the greatest need.

The service is making better use of technology to improve efficiency and effectiveness

The service has considered how changes in technology and future innovation may affect risk. It has an overarching digital and data strategy for 2021–2024, which is linked to the IRMP and sets out high-level service priorities. It also aims to use opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness presented by changes in technology. For example, it has made improvements in several areas, such as increasing the broadband network speed and improving the capability of computers on some fire stations, but there is more to do. It has also allowed some staff to work flexibly by providing more equipment, such as laptops, tablets and remote connections where needed.

We identified in our last inspection that the service should make sure its systems are improving effectiveness and efficiency as intended. The service is making good progress, including making a £1.2m investment through its capital programme. Therefore, the area for improvement relating to this from our last inspection has been closed.

The service should make sure it continues to have in place the capacity and capability it needs to achieve sustainable transformation. It should also routinely seek opportunities to work with others to improve efficiency and provide better services in the future.

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

The service considers and uses opportunities for making some extra income. We found examples of this in the use of its estates, such as leasing premises to other organisations and hosting telecommunications masts on drill towers.

Where appropriate, it has secured some external funding to invest in improvements to the service it gives the public. These include improvements in its prevention work where it is supported with resources from partner organisations and external companies.

Promoting the right values and culture

Requires improvement

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

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

Areas for improvement

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

The service should monitor secondary contracts to make sure working hours are not exceeded.

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

Main findings

The service's culture continues to improve, but there is still more work to do

The service has well-defined values, which it communicates well. Values are displayed prominently throughout the service and included in key policies. It has also incorporated the [Core Code of Ethics](#). There is mandatory training for all staff on this, but not everyone has a good understanding of it.

Principal officers act as role models and consistently show commitment to the service values through their behaviours. Staff told us of the progress that service leaders have made to improve the culture, and this is encouraging to find.

We also saw that many staff across all levels of the service show behaviours that reflect its values. But we found that the culture of the organisation and individual behaviours didn't always align with them. We found that stations and [watches](#) were managed inconsistently. Some behaviours we saw or were told about didn't meet the standards expected, and there wasn't a strong culture of challenge at all locations and in all teams. This allows poor behaviours to continue. The service should review and improve how well stations and teams are managed. Those staff still not demonstrating the service values need to improve their behaviour. The service should also make sure that staff and managers are well supported to challenge poor behaviours. Therefore, the area for improvement relating to this from our last inspection remains.

The service promotes mental and physical health and well-being

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

- [trauma risk management](#) following significant incidents;
- an occupational health service;
- counselling and therapies;
- mental health first aid courses;
- fitness testing; and
- medicals and health screening.

There are good provisions in place to promote staff well-being. These include posting videos and real-life stories on the intranet to raise awareness and encourage staff to share concerns.

Most staff reported that they understand and have confidence in the well-being support processes available. Of the respondents to our survey, 89 percent (237 out of 266) told us that they can access services to support their mental well-being.

We found that managers understood the welfare arrangements for staff and could implement these when needed. In our survey, 35 percent (94 out of 266) of respondents told us that they discuss their personal well-being and/or work-related stress with their manager weekly. We were told that 21 percent (55 out of 266) discuss it monthly, 10 percent (26 out of 266) quarterly and 14 percent (36 out of 266) annually.

The service should make sure that staff have full confidence in health and safety policies

The service has health and safety policies in place, which staff understand. It learns from health and safety events and has reporting and monitoring processes in place.

These policies and procedures are readily available, and the service promotes them effectively to staff. Our survey showed that 87 percent (232 out of 266) of respondents felt their personal safety and welfare were treated seriously at work.

However, during our inspection, we were told about some health and safety concerns. These included risk assessments not being completed for all training sessions and events and concerns over fire engines being mobilised without the right skills. There is frustration that health and safety processes aren't always being applied. The service should make sure that staff have full confidence in its health and safety policies and that concerns are acted on appropriately.

The service isn't effectively monitoring and managing the working hours of staff

During our last inspection, we found that the service didn't adequately monitor the working hours of staff. In this inspection, we found that there was still more work to do. Therefore, the area for improvement relating to this from our last inspection remains.

Despite having policies in place, there is still a lack of reliable information relating to the working hours of staff with other primary employment, secondary employment and dual contracts.

On 31 March 2023, 17 percent of staff had dual contracts within the service. The service should make sure that all staff are well rested and safe to work. It also needs to be sure it is adhering to the [Working Time Regulations 1998](#).

Staff understanding of absence management has improved, but sickness levels have risen

We found that there were clear processes in place to manage absences for all staff. There is clear guidance for managers, who are now more confident in using them. The service manages absences more consistently and in accordance with policy. When we last inspected, we found that the service had just implemented a new policy. This is now more established, and managers are provided with training. The service has also improved the way it monitors absence data and makes good use of a dashboard with live data to understand attendance-related issues. Therefore, the area for improvement relating to this from our last inspection has been closed.

In the year ending 31 March 2023, the average number of days not worked per firefighter due to long-term sickness increased by 3 percent compared to the previous year. The average number of days not worked per firefighter due to short-term sickness increased by 26 percent compared to the previous year. The service should continue working to reduce this.

Getting the right people with the right skills

Requires improvement

Essex County Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at getting the right people with the right skills.

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

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure all firefighters are appropriately trained in safety-critical skills, such as breathing apparatus use and driving.

The service should assure itself that all managers are appropriately trained and supported in their roles.

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

Main findings

Workforce planning has improved, but the service should make sure that staff have all the skills they need to carry out their roles

The service has improved its workforce planning since our last inspection. It uses its strategic workforce planning processes to make sure that skills and capabilities align better with what it needs to effectively carry out its IRMP. For example, we found better workforce planning and understanding of skills for prevention and protection work. Therefore, the area for improvement relating to this from our last inspection has been closed.

Workforce and succession planning is scrutinised in regular meetings. The service makes good use of a range of data to make decisions. It also uses a range of methods to understand and manage its requirements, which it does through a transfer and promotions board, an operations resource board and a learning and development steering group. Strategic workforce planning is presented to the service leadership team on a quarterly basis.

The service monitors staff competence through its competency management system. Training is recorded consistently, and the service can assure itself of the competency of its staff. Therefore, the area for improvement relating to this from our last inspection has been closed. It regularly updates its understanding of staff skills and risk-critical safety capabilities through its annual training plans. This approach means the service can identify gaps in workforce capabilities and resilience. It also means it can make sound and financially sustainable decisions about current and future needs.

However, we identified that some firefighters haven't been able to access all the safety-critical training that they need to fulfil their roles. This includes breathing apparatus and driver training. A lack of competency is negatively affecting the service's ability to mobilise fire engines efficiently and effectively with appropriate skill levels. The service should make sure that it is able to provide enough safety-critical training for all its staff in a timely manner. We have identified an area for improvement for this.

The service needs to improve aspects of its learning and development

Although the service provides some learning and development, it doesn't always meet the needs of its staff or, indeed, of the service. For example, many resources such as online training are available, but there are fewer opportunities for staff to take part in exercises to reinforce their skills and knowledge of operational procedures. Some operational staff told us that they hadn't received sufficient training on tall buildings and the procedures for handling complex information at incidents, such as those involving multiple [fire survival guidance](#) calls.

Most staff told us that they can access a range of learning and development resources. Of the respondents to our survey, 80 percent (213 out of 266) from across all staff groups told us that they have received sufficient training. This allows them to do their jobs effectively.

We found that some managers aren't adequately trained and supported to carry out all their duties. While some training is provided, the service should make sure that it is appropriate and that there is further support available when needed. This includes training for managing performance, behaviours, discipline, grievances and health and safety. We have also identified an area for improvement for this.

Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity

Requires improvement

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

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

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure issues identified through its staff survey are appropriately addressed and that actions taken are communicated to staff in a timely way.

To identify and tackle barriers to equality of opportunity, and make its workforce more representative, the service should ensure diversity and inclusion are well understood and become important values of the whole of the service.

Promising practice

The safe share scheme prevents potential escalations

In January 2023, the service introduced a 'safe share' scheme for staff to confidentially and anonymously report concerns or seek support.

It closes the gap between openly reporting concerns internally and whistle-blowing externally. Through this, issues that are affecting staff are being identified earlier than they would have been previously. This has prevented potential escalations.

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 continue improving how it seeks and acts on staff feedback and challenge

The service continues to have ways of gathering staff feedback, such as the staff survey, and a formal process for raising concerns at different levels. It has also improved how it communicates the outcomes to staff, including through managers' briefings and training sessions.

However, staff still lack confidence in the service's feedback processes, and not all staff we spoke to think they are entirely effective. Only 61 percent (163 out of 266) of respondents to our survey felt confident in them. Therefore, the area for improvement relating to this from our last inspection remains.

Representative bodies provided a mixed response to whether they felt engagement with the service was meaningful. But we did find evidence of regular collaboration, and the service still uses the principles of 'working well together' that we reported on in our last inspection.

We were pleased to find that the service had improved the way that staff can speak up. It has developed a 'safe share' scheme for staff to confidentially and anonymously report concerns or seek support, which we have identified as promising practice.

The service has reviewed its policies but should continue to tackle all forms of bullying, harassment and discrimination

In our last inspection, we reported that the service should review the effectiveness of its policies on bullying, [harassment](#) and discrimination. During this inspection, we were pleased to find that the service had done this, and it updated its dignity at work policy in April 2023. The new policy incorporates the Core Code of Ethics and includes reporting methods such as the new safe share scheme. It has clear definitions and sets out roles and responsibilities for its staff. The service has also provided training. Therefore, the area for improvement relating to this from our last inspection has been closed.

While the service has reviewed its policies, it should continue to tackle all forms of bullying, harassment and discrimination and support its managers and staff to consistently do so. In our staff survey, 20 percent of respondents (52 out of 266) told us that they had felt bullied or harassed at work in the last 12 months. And 21 percent (57 out of 266) told us that they had felt discriminated against at work in the same period. These instances were most commonly related to job roles or terms of contract and performance at work. Most respondents who said they had felt bullied, harassed or discriminated against didn't report it, primarily because they felt nothing would happen.

The service is working to address disproportionality in recruitment and retention, but there is still more to do to recruit a representative workforce

There is an open, fair and honest recruitment process for staff or those wishing to work for the fire and rescue service. The service has an effective system to understand and remove the risk of disproportionality in recruitment processes. For example, it has used feedback from staff and worked with other fire and rescue services to improve its processes. The service has a good understanding of data recorded through recruitment processes. It regularly reviews its diversity, including for leavers and joiners to the service. It identifies and monitors trends.

The service has put a lot of effort into making its recruitment processes fair and understandable. Its recruitment policy includes information on a range of selection methods and offers advice and information for candidates. The policy is comprehensive and covers opportunities in all roles. The service actively promotes the importance of recruiting a diverse workforce, and it has hosted webinars on interview skills for under-represented groups. It also uses inclusion panels in interviews for roles ranging from station managers to more senior-level positions.

The service advertises recruitment opportunities both internally and externally. But as we found in our last inspection, it needs to encourage more applicants from diverse backgrounds into middle and senior-level positions. It isn't doing as much as it could to make its workforce more representative. This was an area for improvement from our last inspection, and it remains. The service could still make better use of exit interviews to understand why staff leave the organisation. And we found that some staff didn't understand or value the importance of positive action.

In 2021/22, 7 percent of new joiners self-declared as being from an ethnic minority background. The percentage of firefighters from an ethnic minority background increased from 4.3 (23 people) in 2018/19 to 5.6 (48 people) in 2021/22. The percentage of female firefighters increased from 3.7 (42 people) to 5.7 (61 people) over the same period.

For the whole workforce, in 2021/22, 5.4 percent were from an ethnic minority background compared to 16.2 percent in the local population and 8 percent throughout all services. And 18 percent were women compared to an average of 18.6 percent throughout all services.

The service is improving its approach to EDI

The service continues to improve its approach to EDI. It makes sure it is improving how it offers the right services to its communities and can support staff with [protected characteristics](#). For example, we found that the service has a good understanding of the value of internal and external network groups. However, attendance levels for different groups vary. The service is well represented in external groups including the Essex equality network.

There is good scrutiny, and the service monitors activity and progress at its people strategy board. The service is using data more effectively to understand the demographics of its workforce. Therefore, the area for improvement relating to this from our last inspection has been closed.

Some staff, including those with protected characteristics, told us how the service promotes EDI and how they had been personally supported. The service has dignity and inclusion advocates to support its staff. However, we found that there was a lack of training in and awareness of issues relating to race.

The service assesses equality impact through [people impact assessments \(PIAs\)](#), which are aligned to guidance in the [National Fire Chiefs Council's equality impact assessment toolkit](#). We reviewed a selection of these. Although the service has a process in place to assess equality impact, it doesn't always properly assess or act on the impact on each protected characteristic.

The service has made progress since our last inspection with data, training, support and guidance for staff who need it. But we found that PIAs were completed inconsistently. For example, some of the stated review dates weren't adhered to and identified actions weren't always followed up. Of the PIAs that we reviewed, we found that the service had consulted well with internal stakeholders but liaison with external stakeholders was limited. PIAs are reviewed centrally but there is no formal quality assurance of them.

Managing performance and developing leaders

Adequate

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

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

Area for improvement

The service should 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 has an individual performance management process, but it needs to make sure it is consistently managed

The service has a process in place for performance and development, which allows it to effectively develop and assess the performance of all staff. Staff have annual appraisals with a six-monthly review. The service also intends for its staff to have ongoing meaningful discussions. We were pleased to see that there has been an increase in the number of completed appraisals since our last inspection. In 2022/23, 94 percent of wholetime staff, 97 percent of on-call staff, 95 percent of control staff and 94 percent of support staff had completed a performance development review.

Through our staff survey, 86 percent of respondents (229 out of 266) reported that they had a performance development review with their manager in the last 12 months, although only 62 percent (141 out of 229) of those felt it was useful.

We heard both positive and negative comments from staff regarding their experience of appraisals and performance management during our inspection. The service should assure itself that its performance management process is consistently applied across the service and for all staff groups.

The service has open and transparent promotion and progression processes

The service has put a lot of effort into developing its promotion and progression processes so that they are fair, and all staff can understand them. They are linked to a leadership framework and the service's values. The promotion and progression policies are comprehensive and cover opportunities in all roles.

It manages selection processes consistently. Panel members receive interview and assessment training. And we found that candidates get detailed feedback, which is recorded by the service.

The service acknowledged that it still doesn't manage temporary promotions as well as it could. In the year ending 31 March 2023, there were 127 staff on temporary promotion. The service told us this is mainly caused by secondments and long-term sickness.

The service needs to make sure it identifies and develops staff fairly

The service has succession-planning processes in place for operational and non-operational staff, which allow it to manage high-potential staff into leadership roles. But some staff don't feel that these are fair. The service needs to make sure that staff feel confident that processes to identify talent and to support aspiring leaders are open and fair. Therefore, the area for improvement relating to this from our last inspection remains.

Of the respondents to our survey, 40 percent (106 out of 266) didn't feel that there are opportunities to develop their careers in the service.

The service does have talent management schemes to develop specific staff. The learning, resourcing and succession programme has now been running for over two years, and there have been successful outcomes from it. The service told us that 77 percent of promotions in the last 12 months have come through the programme. Staff can apply to access it themselves or their line manager can nominate them through the appraisal process.

The service is reviewing the December 2022 [leading the service and leading and developing people](#) fire standards and considering how it will implement them. This should include how the service encourages more applicants from diverse backgrounds, especially into middle and senior-level positions.

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