

Fire & Rescue Service 2021/22

Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of Essex County Fire and Rescue Service



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About this inspection

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

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

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

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

What inspection judgments mean

Our categories of graded judgment are:

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








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





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







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

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

Overview

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

| Question | This inspection | 2018/19 |
|---|---|-----------------------------|
|  Efficiency |  Requires improvement | Requires improvement |
| Making best use of resources |  Requires improvement | Requires improvement |
| Future affordability |  Requires improvement | Good |

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

HM Inspector's summary

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

I am satisfied with some of the improvements in performance of Essex County Fire and Rescue Service in keeping people safe and secure from fires and other risks, but there are more areas where the service still needs to improve.

We were pleased to see that the service has made progress since our 2019 inspection with developing an effective planning framework and aligning its strategic plans, assessing and modelling risk, learning from operational activity, improving its culture and adopting service values, and providing out-of-hours support for technical fire safety advice.

But we were disappointed to see that the service hasn't made the progress we expected since our 2019 inspection. For example:

- the service isn't aligning resources to risk, including meeting its prevention and protection strategies;
- the service hasn't addressed future financial challenges and appropriate use of resources;
- workforce productivity still needs to increase;
- the service isn't meeting its own response standards;
- it hasn't implemented national operational guidance;
- it doesn't fully understand and address equality issues;

- it doesn't address disproportionality in recruitment and retention;
- it needs to do more to drive out all unacceptable behaviour and tackle bullying and harassment; and
- it needs to make sure staff are trained well enough to carry out all their responsibilities.

These are the findings I consider most important from our assessments of the service over the last year.

During our inspection in 2019, we found that significant improvement in the organisational culture was required. I do not underestimate the scale of that challenge and I am encouraged by the improvements that are being made, but there is still work to do. The service has a clearly defined set of values, which are now more widely understood, but it must make sure they are fully embedded and that all staff understand what is expected and behave appropriately to maintain a professional and effective service to the public, and a working environment where all staff feel safe and supported.

The service's resources need to better align to risk across prevention, protection and response. We found that although the service has addressed the previous area for improvement in identifying and understanding the risks it faces, this has not yet translated into the reduction in risk the service has stated it will achieve. The service still doesn't have enough resources to meet its risk-based inspection programme and the [cause of concern](#) from 2019 remains. I am disappointed to see the lack of involvement by station-based staff in prevention work.

I have asked the inspection team to revisit the service to review the progress being made against the cause of concern and areas for improvement, and to monitor overall progress through continuous engagement.



Roy Wilsher

HM Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Service in numbers



Response

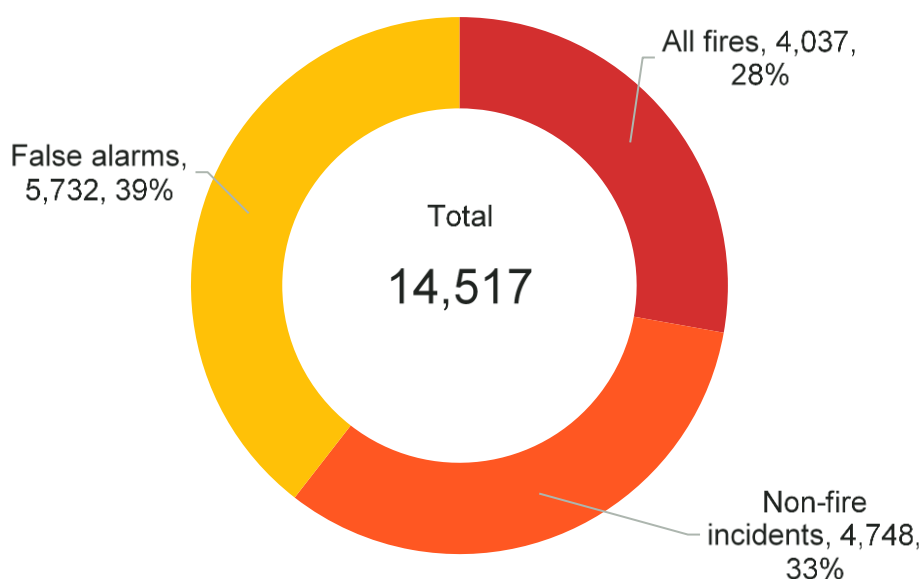
| | Essex | England |
|---|-------|---------|
| Incidents attended per 1,000 population Year ending 30 June 2021 | 7.82 | 9.36 |
| Home fire safety checks carried out by fire and rescue service per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2021 | 2.75 | 4.47 |
| Fire safety audits per 100 known premises Year ending 31 March 2021 | 5.30 | 1.70 |
| Average availability of pumps Year ending 31 March 2021 | 85.0% | 86.4% |



Cost

| | | |
|--|--------|--------|
| Firefighter cost per person Year ending 31 March 2021 | £23.30 | £23.73 |
|--|--------|--------|

Incidents attended in the year to 30 June 2021

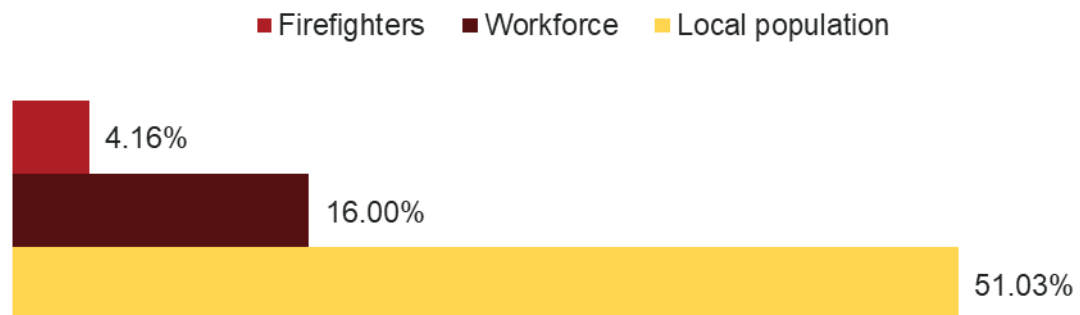




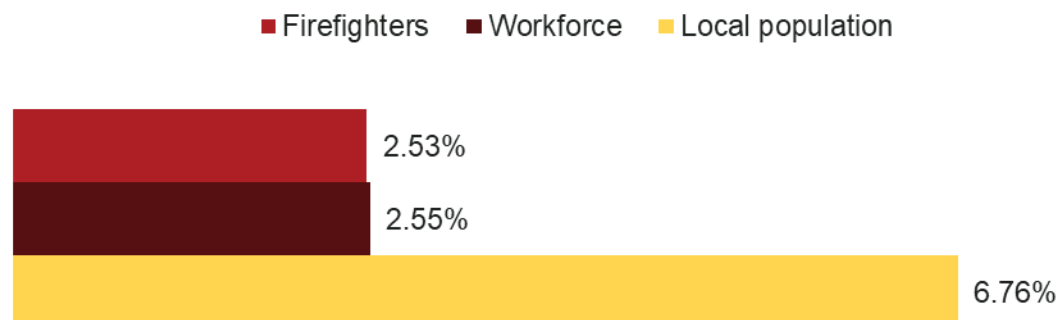
Workforce

| | Essex | England |
|--|-------|---------|
| Five-year change in total workforce 2016 to 2021 | 0.54% | -1.60% |
| Number of firefighters per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2021 | 0.62 | 0.62 |
| Percentage of firefighters who are wholetime Year ending 31 March 2021 | 56.3% | 64.4% |

Percentage of population, firefighters and workforce who are female as at 31 March 2020



Percentage of population, firefighters and workforce who are from ethnic minority backgrounds as at 31 March 2020



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

Effectiveness



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



Requires improvement

Summary

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

We are encouraged by the work the service has done since our last inspection to identify and better understand the risks it faces, including the tools it is using to do this. It must continue working to make sure that all risk information is up to date and available to staff who need it, particularly the information gathered from its protection activity.

It now has clear prevention and protection strategies based on its [integrated risk management plan \(IRMP\)](#), but there has been very little improvement in allocating resources to carry out the work it has identified as needing to be done. The cause of concern from our last inspection remains, as the service still doesn't have enough trained specialist staff to carry out fire safety audits of its highest-risk premises and it isn't meeting its own targets.

The service is still not meeting its own response standards. It must better align its resources to risk. The service is implementing a new response strategy and it must make sure it has the right resources in the right place at the right time.

Only staff at a few locations are trained and able to respond to marauding terrorist attack-type incidents, but all emergency responders could be required to attend this type of incident and if firefighters aren't following the same procedures as other responders then public safety could be compromised.

Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies



Good (2019: Requires improvement)

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

The service knows the risks it faces

The service has assessed an appropriate range of risks and threats after a thorough IRMP process. When assessing risk, it has considered relevant information collected from a broad range of internal and external sources and data sets.

The service makes good use of a [risk modelling](#) tool to identify current hazards and risks. This tool is available to managers. They can use it to see overall risk scores through a county-wide map, and can focus on command area, district or station. It contains links to guidance on the reason for each risk and the relevant data sources.

But the service could do more to identify and understand future risks, such as how new and proposed developments will impact its plans.

The service has consulted local communities and started a constructive dialogue. It has used various consultation methods to understand risks and explains how it intends to mitigate them. For example, it created a British Sign Language video to explain the consultation.

But it didn't:

- share the outcomes of the consultation by the same methods;
- show the consultation's overall effectiveness; or
- assess how effective the activities were.

The service has an effective IRMP

After assessing relevant risks, the service has recorded its findings in an easily understood IRMP for 2020 to 2024. The IRMP corresponds well to the service's planning framework, as well as to plans at departmental level. It describes how the service should effectively resource prevention, protection and response activity, so it can mitigate or reduce the risks and threats the community faces now. We are encouraged that the service has addressed this area for improvement, which we established in our last inspection.

The service gathers and communicates information about the highest risks well

The service routinely collects and records risk information about people, places and threats it has identified as involving the highest risk. It has established processes and systems to gather site-specific risk information, which it makes readily available to response staff, although not all records are up to date. This lets them identify, reduce and mitigate risk effectively.

The service continues to communicate urgent risk critical information effectively to fire stations.

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

The service must keep risk information up to date

We are concerned that during our review, not all site-specific risk information records were up to date. Some of the out-of-date records are classed as high or very high risk.

During our last inspection, we established gathering and recording relevant and up-to-date risk information as an area for improvement. The service has not fully addressed this. It is vital that firefighters attending emergency incidents have current and reliable risk information to resolve incidents safely and effectively.

The service should improve the way it records and shares information gathered by protection teams

We are disappointed to find that the risk information collected by protection teams isn't always shared throughout the service. And risk information from protection work isn't always updated. This means not all staff can access it and understand it, so the service can't effectively identify, reduce and mitigate risk. More work is needed so staff in response roles can access all the information they need.

The service uses feedback from operational activity to help it better understand risk

The service routinely updates risk assessments and uses feedback from local and national operational activity to inform its planning.

Our review of incident debriefs found the service has incorporated recommendations for learning into development and training for staff.

The service continually updates the data it uses to determine risk. This allows it to focus its activities where they will make the most impact. It also means the service can regularly review its emergency response options.

The service has used learning from the Grenfell Tower Inquiry to reduce risk

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

Essex County Fire and Rescue Service has responded positively and proactively to learning from this tragedy. At the time of our inspection, the service was on track to having assessed the risk of each high-rise building in its service area by the end of 2021.

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

Preventing fires and other risks



Requires improvement (2019: Requires improvement)

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

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

Areas for improvement

- The service should make sure it allocates enough resources to meet its prevention strategy.
- The service should make sure staff understand how to identify vulnerability and safeguard [vulnerable people](#).
- The service should evaluate its prevention activity so it understands what works.

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

The service's prevention strategy isn't achieving the stated risk reduction

The service's prevention strategy is clearly linked to the risks identified in its IRMP. But this doesn't yet translate into the reduction in risk the service has stated it will achieve.

We are, however, encouraged to see that the service is developing a clear prevention strategy to guide its work. It now needs to effectively use its resources to achieve its aims.

The service's focus on those most at risk is improving

The service is improving the way it focuses its activity on those most at risk. It is moving towards a more risk-based approach, prioritising people and targeting its response. It is continuing its work on embedding a person-centred approach.

Of the 5,109 [home fire safety checks \(HFSCs\)](#) carried out by the service in 2020/21, 2,954 (58 percent) were targeted at households with a person over the age of 65 and/or a person with disabilities. This is similar to the proportion across all services in England (57 percent).

The service isn't carrying out enough prevention activity in local communities

Firefighters could do more to contribute towards prevention activity. The service has committed to more HFSCs by firefighters, but it hasn't yet achieved its aims. We found only limited examples of station-based staff carrying out other activities – such as road and water safety work – in their local communities. These activities are identified in the service's strategy. As a result, [vulnerable people](#) and others may not be getting the support they need.

The service is completing fewer HFSCs per 1,000 people in the service area than the rate across all services in England. It carried out 5,109 HFSCs in 2020/21. This is 2.8 per 1,000 people in the service area, compared to 4.5 per 1,000 people throughout all services in England. The service has committed to increasing the number of person-centred HFSCs by firefighters and developing a more inclusive approach.

Firefighters show little awareness or understanding of station or district prevention planning. We did find some examples of good local prevention initiatives, but they were infrequent. These initiatives were mainly driven by the enthusiasm and commitment of individual staff members, rather than being part of a structured service approach.

Not all on-call stations are contributing to prevention work. The service allows some stations to opt out for reasons of availability and capacity.

Partnership working helps the service understand risk and plan prevention activity

The service receives data and intelligence from organisations it works with. This allows it to base HFSCs on risk and vulnerability.

It is a member of the [Safer Essex Roads Partnership](#), leading the FireBike and Community Speed Watch initiatives. The service uses data from its partner

organisations to inform its plans. Safer Essex Roads Partnership has recently launched Vision Zero – a programme that aims to reduce the number of road deaths in Essex to zero.

The service has increased prevention work since the easing of pandemic restrictions

We considered how the service had adapted its prevention work during our COVID-19 specific inspection from 28 September to 13 October 2020. At that time, we found it had adapted its public prevention work well. Over the period of the pandemic that we reviewed, the service conducted fewer HFSCs and [safe and well visits](#) than it would normally carry out.

Since then, we are encouraged to find that the number of in-person safe and well visits and HFSCs has risen. The service's reporting shows station staff completed 151 HFSCs in the first quarter of 2021, compared with just 2 in the first quarter of 2020. Officers in the central prevention team have increased the number of safe and well visits they have carried out in the first quarter of 2021 by 41 percent, compared with the same period in 2020.

The service tackles fire-setting behaviour

The service works closely with the police and other local partners to share information and support a multi-agency approach to fire-setting behaviour. It has a dedicated arson reduction manager. In Maldon and Dengie, a tri-service officer (fire and rescue, police, and ambulance) works as part of a pilot scheme to reduce arson on farms and in rural communities.

The service targets and educates people who show signs of fire-setting behaviour, using a range of suitable and effective interventions. This includes visiting schools as part of its education programme and running the Juvenile Fire-Setters intervention scheme. Its website includes information on arson prevention.

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 make safe and well visits. These visits cover an appropriate range of hazards that can put vulnerable people at greater risk from fire and other emergencies. But we are disappointed to find that station-based staff aren't carrying out safe and well visits.

Not all staff understand vulnerability or have the confidence to respond to safeguarding concerns

The service must make sure all staff know how to identify vulnerability and [safeguard](#) vulnerable people. We found an inconsistent level of understanding about vulnerability. Many staff we interviewed told us they have been trained to act appropriately and promptly in response to safeguarding concerns. They said they feel confident, know how to identify safeguarding concerns and are aware of the processes to follow. But some staff are less confident; they said they are not aware of the processes and don't feel adequately trained to raise concerns.

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

The service works with a wide range of organisations to prevent fires and other emergencies. These include local authority teams, the NHS, police, BOC Home Oxygen Service and other members of the Safer Essex Roads Partnership.

Despite a strong relationship with adult social care, the service doesn't make a significant number of referrals. In 2019/20, it made referrals from 4 percent (329 of 7,694) of visits.

Other organisations make referrals to the service so it can give home safety advice to reduce the risk of fire. The number of referrals from and into the service has increased since the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions. Closer working with the NHS and police has also resulted in a recent increase in referrals from those partners. The service acts appropriately on the referrals it receives.

The service routinely exchanges information with other public sector organisations about people and groups at greatest risk. It uses the information to challenge planning assumptions and target prevention activity. It has contributed to specific interventions in vulnerable communities and helped a resettlement project for refugees.

As part of its response to COVID-19, the service co-chaired the [Essex Resilience Forum \(ERF\)](#), along with the Essex Strategic Coordination Group and the multi-agency information cell. The service is an active member of the ERF, and leaders told us this helps the service to be fully engaged in multi-agency responses.

The service needs to keep improving the way it evaluates its prevention strategy

In 2019 we recommended that the service should evaluate its prevention work so it:

- understands the benefits; and
- makes sure it is reducing risk in local communities.

We have seen progress. Some prevention activities take account of feedback from the public, other organisations and other parts of the service (for example, the service's education programmes). But the service needs to do more work to understand the overall impact of its prevention strategy.

The service hasn't formally reviewed its prevention partnerships. Without this evaluation, it can't demonstrate the partnerships' effectiveness.

Protecting the public through fire regulation



Requires improvement (2019: 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 for enforcing the legislation.

Cause of concern

The service has insufficient resources to meet its risk-based inspection programme. It is currently not meeting its targets. As a result, partially skilled operational staff are carrying out high-risk visits, although the service acknowledges that these are not audits. There is an absence of quality assurance of audits and visits. There is a low amount of enforcement activity. There is limited proactive engagement with businesses to promote fire safety.

Recommendation

By 30 November 2022, the service should develop and implement a clear strategy for how it will effectively meet its obligations in relation to ensuring compliance with fire safety. This should include ensuring it has appropriately trained resources, a consistent use of enforcement powers; and a mechanism to assure itself on the quality of its inspections.

Area for improvement

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

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

The service has a protection strategy linked to its IRMP

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

Staff from all parts of 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 aligns activity to risk, but it can't resource it well enough

The service's risk-based inspection programme focuses on the highest-risk buildings. The service collects data and uses it to establish which buildings are highest risk and should be included in the inspection programme. It also actively manages its Building Risk Review programme and has identified more premises to add to it.

In 2020/21 the service carried out 2,612 protection audits, equating to 5.3 per 100 known premises. This is higher than the average across services in England of 1.7 per 100. But worryingly, we found that the service doesn't have enough trained specialist

staff to carry out protection activities at its highest-risk premises. At 31 March 2021, the service had recruited an additional 11 fire protection staff; although due to training requirements only 19 staff were competent to undertake high-risk inspections compared to 31 in 2016.

The service isn't consistently auditing the highest-risk buildings it has identified in the timescales it has set. The service told us it only inspects 18 percent of very high-risk premises as often as it should, according to its set timescales. For high-risk premises, the proportion is only 33 percent. From April to August 2021, the service was 541 audits behind its target, with the situation becoming worse each month. As a result, the cause of concern from our last inspection remains.

The service has adapted its protection activities since the easing of pandemic restrictions

We considered how the service had adapted its protection activity during our COVID-19 specific inspection from 28 September to 13 October 2021. At that time, we found it had adapted its protection work well. Since then, we are encouraged to find audits have continued and the service identifies the changing risk profile as restrictions ease. It is working to mitigate those changing risks, for example, in relation to fires in food and drinks venues.

The service has carried out fire safety audits at high-rise buildings

The service has carried out audits at all high-rise buildings it has identified as having cladding similar to the type installed on Grenfell Tower. It makes information gathered during these audits available to response teams and control operators, so they can respond more effectively in an emergency.

At the time of our inspection, the service was on track to have visited all the high-rise, high-risk buildings it had identified in its service area by the end of 2021.

The fire safety audits we sampled were completed to a high standard

We reviewed a range of audits carried out across the service of different types of premises. This included audits:

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

The audits we reviewed were completed to a high standard in a consistent, systematic way. They were in line with the service's policies. The service should ensure it makes all relevant information from the audits available to operational teams and control room operators.

There is not enough quality assurance or evaluation of protection activity

The service carries out limited quality assurance of its protection activity. There is no formal quality assurance of inspecting officers' work or that of other staff. And it doesn't routinely collect equality data as part of its inspection programme.

It doesn't have good evaluation tools in place to:

- measure its effectiveness; or
- make sure all sections of its communities get equal access to the protection services that meet their needs.

Enforcement activity has increased, but it still needs work

During our last inspection in 2019, we were disappointed to find staff were reluctant to act when premises repeatedly breached fire safety. There is now a growing appetite within the service for enforcement, but there is still work to do.

In the year ending 31 March 2021, the service issued 313 informal notifications and 11 enforcement notices. It didn't issue any alteration notices or prohibition notices, and it didn't undertake any prosecutions.

The service responds promptly to building consultations

The service responds to most building consultations on time. This supports its statutory responsibility to comment on fire safety arrangements at new and altered buildings. The service responded to 95 percent (1,060 of 1,110) of all building consultations received in 2020/21 within the 15-day time frame.

The service works with other organisations to regulate fire safety

The service works closely with other enforcement agencies to regulate fire safety, and it routinely exchanges risk information with them. It works with local authority partners when responding to building consultations and through its Building Risk Review programme.

We found the service communicates effectively with the relevant people during the enforcement process. It also engages with those who have an interest in public safety through [safety advisory group](#) meetings.

The service isn't proactively engaging with businesses to promote fire safety compliance

In our last inspection, we recommended the service improves the way it works with local businesses and large organisations to share information and expectations on compliance with fire safety regulations. It does engage with businesses through its [primary authority scheme](#) but still needs to do more. Therefore, the area for improvement remains.

The service isn't doing enough to reduce unwanted fire signals

The service takes limited action to reduce the number of unwanted fire signals (any fire alarm signal other than a genuine fire or test signal). There is a process for staff to follow, and the service supports and advises businesses. But in the year ending 31 March 2021 it attended 99 percent (1,472 of 1,485) of automatic fire alarm calls and the total number of fire-related false alarms remains steady.

This means engines may not be available to respond to genuine incidents because they are attending false alarms. It also creates a risk to the public, with more fire engines travelling at high speed on the roads.

The service has effective out-of-hours support for technical fire safety advice

In our last inspection, we recommended the service improves its arrangements for giving specialist protection advice out of hours. We are encouraged to see it has addressed this. The service now has arrangements in place.

Responding to fires and other emergencies



Requires improvement (2019: Good)

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 area.

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 make sure its operational staff have good access to relevant and up-to-date cross-border risk information.

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

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

The service recognises its response strategy isn't clearly linked to the risks identified in its IRMP. Leaders couldn't always explain the rationale for the location of all the service's fire engines and response staff, or their working patterns.

But we are encouraged to see the service is implementing a new response strategy to make sure resources are better aligned with risk. For example, it has identified core stations to help manage its resources. This should help the service have staff and engines in the right place at the right time.

The service is converting four of its day-crewed stations to an on-call duty system. This is ongoing. It based this decision on data and risk analysis from the IRMP process.

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 10 minutes or less.

The service doesn't meet its standards.

In the year to 31 March 2021, the service's average response time to potentially life-threatening calls was 10 minutes and 23 seconds. This has improved since our last inspection, when it was an average of 10 minutes and 48 seconds (between 1 April 2018 and 31 December 2018).

In 2020/21, the service attended 86 percent of all operational incidents within 15 minutes. This is the same percentage as in 2018.

Home Office data shows that in the year to 31 March 2021, the service's average response time to all [primary fires](#) was 9 minutes and 44 seconds. This is in line with the average for significantly rural services in England (9 minutes and 45 seconds).

To support its response strategy, the service aims to have 66 engines available at 5.00pm, 6.00pm and 7.00pm each day. The service didn't meet this target for any months in the 2020/21 period.

During the 2020/21 period, on average, 85 percent of engines were available across the service. This figure was 98.6 percent for wholetime engines and 79.2 percent for on-call engines.

The service's crewing model isn't helping it meet the fire standards it has set. In our last inspection, we reported that staff can book leave at short notice, meaning the service had to find cover. This is still a problem.

We are also concerned that in 2020/21, there were 27 instances where there was a failure to mobilise a fire engine due to problems with the mobilising system. This can result in resource being drawn from elsewhere to cover and delays in attending incidents.

Staff understand how to command incidents safely

There are trained incident commanders in the service, and it assesses them regularly and properly. At 31 March 2021, there were more accredited incident commanders (439) in the service than the number required (314). This lets the service safely, assertively and effectively manage the whole range of incidents it could face, from the small and routine to complex multi-agency incidents.

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

Fire control isn't involved enough in all the service's activities

[Fire control](#) staff aren't consistently involved in the service's debrief and assurance activity. For example, the service asks control staff to give written feedback following incidents, but it doesn't often invite them to attend debriefs. And it doesn't consistently pass information from debriefs to control staff.

The service doesn't often involve control staff in exercises and there is no control-specific exercise schedule. Control management wants to increase the team's involvement.

The service needs to be able to handle simultaneous fire survival guidance calls

The service hasn't sufficiently reviewed its ability to give fire survival guidance to many callers simultaneously, as we would have expected it to. This was identified as learning for fire services after the Grenfell Tower fire. The service has provided some fire survival guidance training, but not all control staff are confident they could give fire survival guidance to many callers simultaneously. The service plans to address this with more training.

Fire control has systems to exchange real-time risk information with incident commanders, other responding partners and supporting fire and rescue services. Maintaining a good awareness of emergency incidents as they are happening helps the service give the public accurate and tailored advice.

Staff can easily access risk information

We sampled a range of risk information, including:

- permanent long-term records;
- temporary short-term records;
- what is in place for firefighters responding to incidents at high-risk, high-rise buildings; and
- what information fire control holds.

All the records we checked were detailed. Staff could easily access and understand them.

Firefighters can access risk information through [mobile data terminals](#) and control staff have access to the same risk information as firefighters responding to incidents.

Not all cross-border risk information is available to crews

Firefighters need risk information so they can respond safely and effectively to incidents. The service's crews can't access cross-border risk information from neighbouring services in London and Kent. When we visited fire stations in Essex, we found cross-border information for other services wasn't always available on mobile data terminals.

The service is good at evaluating operational performance

As part of the inspection, we reviewed a range of emergency incidents and training events.

In response to our last inspection, the service introduced a new debrief policy. It now has an effective system for staff to use so they can learn better from operations.

We are pleased to see the service routinely follows its policies to make sure staff command incidents in line with operational guidance. Staff update internal risk information with the information the service receives. Formal and informal debriefing after operational incidents is embedded in the service. And leaders tell staff what the service has learned from operational incidents. It holds debrief reports centrally and makes them available to all staff via the intranet.

We are encouraged to see the service is contributing towards, and acting on, learning from other fire and rescue services and operational learning gathered from other emergency service partners. For example, after a fire in a silo at an Essex grain terminal, the service shared its learning with Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service, as there is a similar facility in that area.

The service hasn't yet implemented national operational guidance

It is disappointing to see there has been a delay in the service adopting [national operational guidance](#), which has not yet been implemented. It plans to implement it fully by 2023.

The service is good at communicating incident-related information to the public

The service has good systems in place to tell the public about ongoing incidents, and to help keep them safe during and after incidents. It uses a range of social media platforms, as well as traditional press releases. It has improved the accessibility of its website.

It has good communication arrangements with partner organisations across the county. For example, it is part of the warn and inform group in the [local resilience forum](#).

Responding to major and multi-agency incidents



Requires improvement (2019: Good)

Essex County Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement 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.

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 IRMP.

There is a wide range of significant risks in the county, including [Control of Major Accident Hazards sites](#). In our inspection, we found the service has established policies, plans and procedures for declaring and responding to major incidents, including a multi-agency response.

It is also familiar with the significant risks neighbouring fire and rescue services might face, and that it might reasonably be asked to respond to in an emergency. Firefighters in Essex have access to some risk information from neighbouring services up to 10 kilometres over the border. It can't access risk information from neighbouring fire and rescue services in London and Kent.

A lack of staff training has the potential to negatively affect how the service can respond to some major and multi-agency incidents

We inspected the service's arrangements for responding to different major incidents, including marauding terrorist attacks. It hasn't trained all firefighters to respond to marauding terrorist attack-type incidents and currently relies on a limited number of staff.

Only specialist officers, and firefighters considered part of the exclusive response team, are trained and able to respond to these incidents. This could affect how firefighters work alongside other blue light responders. If they aren't following the same procedures, public safety could be compromised.

The service works well with other fire and rescue services

The service supports other fire and rescue services responding to emergency incidents. It has procedures in place and it manages them through its emergency planning team. It is intraoperable with these services and can form part of a multi-agency response.

The service has successfully deployed to other services and has used [national resilience assets](#). For example, it provided a high-volume pump for wide-scale flooding incidents and it has mobilised tactical advisors.

Incident commanders have been trained on JESIP

Incident commanders are trained in and are familiar with the JESIP. In our inspection, we found crew and [watch](#) managers were less confident with JESIP than more senior officers.

The service gave us strong evidence that it consistently follows these principles.

It also showed it had participated effectively in the local resilience forum during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some, but not all, staff take part in cross-border exercises

The service participates in cross-border exercises with neighbouring fire and rescue services. This means they can work together effectively to keep the public safe. They consider risks presented by major events, where the service could give support or ask for help from neighbouring services. We are encouraged to see the service uses feedback from these exercises to inform risk information and service plans.

But the service isn't doing enough to make sure all staff, including those in fire control, have opportunities to take part in cross-border exercises. It isn't making sure all staff are confident enough to respond to cross-border incidents. We established this as an area for improvement in our last inspection, and the service still needs to address it.

The service is an active member of the ERF

The service has good arrangements in place to respond to emergencies with other organisations in the ERF. These arrangements include comprehensive plans for Control of Major Accident Hazards sites, as well as specific risk information for sites that pose additional risks.

The service is a valued partner in the forum. It has representatives on the forum's management board, strategic and tactical co-ordinating groups and subgroups. It also takes part in regular training events, and it uses the learning to develop planning assumptions for responding to major and multi-agency incidents.

The service uses national learning

The service keeps itself up to date with [national operational learning](#) from other fire services and [joint organisational learning](#) from other blue light partners, such as the police service and ambulance trust. It uses this learning to inform planning assumptions that it makes with its partners.

Efficiency



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



Requires improvement

Summary

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

We found that the service still lacks resource planning that clearly links to strategic priorities, so it cannot rationalise how it allocates resources to prevention, protection and response activities.

The service has made improvements to the way it scrutinises its budgets, with senior managers having better oversight of financial plans. But it must address the future financial challenges it faces, and plan for the anticipated £4m cumulative budget shortfall by 2025. The service's use of [reserves](#) is not sustainable, and it does not make clear how it uses reserves to promote better ways of working.

The workforce could be more productive. The arrangements for managing performance are weak and don't clearly link resource use to the IRMP and the service's strategic priorities. Station plans are too generic and not widely understood by staff.

Collaboration opportunities with emergency service partners are actively pursued through regular group meetings and established working relationships. We heard examples of joint working with emergency service partners and were told about plans to create a joint police and fire workshop facility. At the time of the inspection, though, we found little evidence of significant efficiencies through collaboration, and no clear evidence of collaborations offering value for money.

The service now has a digital and data strategy that guides developments in information and communication technology. Since our last inspection, new systems to improve how it records and uses information have been implemented. We look forward to seeing how these improve effectiveness and efficiency.

Making best use of resources



Requires improvement (2019: 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 the services' risks and statutory responsibilities. Services should make best possible use of resources to achieve the best results for the public.

The service's budget for 2021/22 is £74m. This is a 1.4 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.
- The service should make sure that it is taking action to reduce non-pay costs and can demonstrate how it is achieving 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.

The service's plans don't effectively support its objectives, but it is making improvements

We are disappointed to see that the service still can't show a clear rationale for the resources allocated between prevention, protection and response activities. The service's plans (including allocating resources to prevention, protection and response activities) still aren't consistent with the risks and priorities identified in its IRMP. For example, the service is behind on its risk-based inspection programme due to a lack of competent staff, and it isn't carrying out enough activity to meet all the priorities set out in its prevention strategy.

But we are encouraged to see the service is less often allocating resources based on previous funding allocations. As part of the improvements it has made so far, the service is giving budgets greater scrutiny. It has removed areas of historic underspending and the 2021/22 budget better reflects actual cost estimates. But it doesn't always use sound scenarios to inform plans.

The service is overseeing its financial plans better, with greater engagement from senior leaders. It now reviews and updates its [medium-term financial plan](#) quarterly. This lets the service incorporate in-year changes and revised assumptions into current plans. It can also continually monitor them.

There is increased rigour in the scrutiny processes for deciding how the service will allocate resources in the future. For example, the service has plans to change its crewing model; it is in the process of converting four day-crewed stations to the [on-call](#) duty system. It is also carrying out a restructure of the prevention team. This shows the service is getting better at approaching financial planning and IRMP planning together.

We found that the service has financial controls in place through its monitoring and scrutiny arrangements. This reduces the risk of misusing public money.

The service could do more to make sure its workforce is productive

The arrangements for managing performance are weak and don't clearly link resource use to the IRMP and the service's strategic priorities. Station plans are too generic; staff don't widely understand them or use them effectively to improve performance.

As we found in our last inspection, the service should do more to make sure its operational workforce is as productive as possible. This includes considering new ways of working and more engagement in prevention work. It still isn't using its firefighters well to meet its targets. The service feels there is capacity that it could use for this purpose. It should make sure it does use it.

Staff raised concerns about the use of regular overtime and how often staff have to move between stations to support the crewing of fire engines. This is likely to be negatively affecting how efficiently the service uses its time to fulfil its priorities.

There have been some improvements to managing performance. For example, senior managers use Microsoft Power BI dashboards to make sure they are better informed about all their responsibilities. Staff have welcomed the recent investment in new technology. They feel it will improve capacity and operational performance.

The service can't yet show its collaboration efforts are resulting in efficiencies

The service can't yet show significant improvements in the way it uses collaboration to make efficiencies. This was an area for improvement in our last inspection, and it still needs addressing.

We are encouraged though to see it is actively exploring opportunities to work with other emergency responders. The service has established working relationships with emergency service partners and it aims to collaborate further. Examples of collaboration beyond the fire sector are:

- sharing premises with other blue light services;
- creating a pilot tri-service officer role; and
- providing a cost-recovery service to the ambulance trust.

The service is planning a joint fleet workshop with the police, and is aiming to phase in a fully collaborative approach to maintenance and workshop facilities. The service also plans to invest further in fleet maintenance equipment for servicing ambulances for the East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust. The budget for 2021/22 contains a £10,000 proposal to upgrade hydraulic lifts.

The service should make sure it monitors, reviews and evaluates the results and value for money of its collaborations, and uses them to learn and make decisions.

The service has business continuity plans in place

The service has good continuity arrangements in place for areas where threats and risks are high. It regularly reviews and tests these threats and risks, so staff are aware of the arrangements and their associated responsibilities. We are pleased to find [fire control](#) is using business continuity plans well. Control regularly tests fallback procedures, and it used its control business continuity plans when the pandemic affected staffing.

The service can't show it is giving value for money

The service doesn't have a clear understanding of how its costs compare to other similar fire and rescue services. There are no metrics in place to measure value for money. The service doesn't currently collect or monitor any financial metrics. Nor has it done any [benchmarking](#) of costs to identify areas of comparatively high or low costs. This means it can't be sure it is giving value for money.

Procurement isn't centralised within the service; different departments have their own procurement staff. This means the service is unlikely to be making the best use of its resources and may not be getting the most efficient results from procurement. We found an improved approach in some areas to developing robust business cases for growth and investment, but it is not clear the whole service is systematically following this approach.

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



Requires improvement (2019: Good)

Essex County Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement 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.

Areas for improvement

- The service needs to better understand the financial challenges it faces. It should strengthen the assumptions that underpin its plans to manage the risk of fire and other risks now and in the future.
- The service should have a clear and sustainable strategic plan for the use of its reserves which promotes new ways of working.
- The service needs to assure itself that it is maximising opportunities to improve effectiveness and efficiency through the better use of technology.

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

The service isn't addressing future financial challenges

The service has a limited understanding of future financial challenges, which weakens its ability to mitigate its main or significant financial risks. The service anticipates a cumulative budget shortfall of £4m by 2025, and there are currently no plans to tackle this.

The service budgets to spend more than its income during every year of the current medium-term financial plan. The service uses both general and earmarked [reserves](#) every year to balance the budget.

Its planning assumptions aren't robust, realistic or prudent. It doesn't adequately recognise the wider external environment or the inclusion of scenario planning for future spending reductions, or opportunities to invest in service improvements.

The opportunities the service has identified to make savings or generate further income are limited. It doesn't yet have any plans to make sustainable savings that will bring its spending in line with its income.

The service's use of reserves isn't sustainable

The service's plan for using its reserves isn't sustainable. It doesn't say how it will use reserves to promote new ways of working.

The current plan will see the general reserve drop to just £240,000 by 2024/25. This is risky for the service, particularly as all areas of the budget that were traditionally subject to underspending have been stripped out. The service's reserves strategy, published in March 2021, says 3 percent of net revenue expenditure is the adequate level of general reserve. But £240,000 is only 0.3 percent.

Total earmarked reserves will also fall to £4.8m by 2024/25. This means the service has no cushion to protect it from unforeseen spending. And there is no financial headroom to invest in improvement and innovations.

Fleet and estates strategies support future service provision

The service's estate and fleet strategies have clear links to the IRMP. This includes work associated with converting day-crewed stations to on-call. Both strategies make the most of opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness.

The service manages its estates well, with rigorous performance monitoring in place. There is also a strong emphasis on improving the environmental performance of buildings and reducing the service's carbon footprint.

It also actively manages its fleet and replaces engines after 15 years. A few years ago, the service tried out some collaborative engine procurement and specification work with Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service, but it has now abandoned this approach.

The service regularly reviews both strategies so it can assess the impact of any changes in estate and fleet provision, including the effect on risk.

There are some ambitious projects listed in the service's capital programme, but they are all at very early stages of development. None are fully costed or funded. High-value capital projects such as the proposed joint fleet workshop with the police will rely upon the service selling assets.

The service needs the capability and capacity to make future technical changes

The service actively considers how changes in technology and future innovation may affect risk. It also seeks to exploit opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness presented by changes in technology. This is aligned to the service's IRMP through its digital and data strategy, which also guides how it develops its information and communications technology (ICT).

We are encouraged that since our last inspection the service has been implementing new systems to improve how it records and uses information. This includes information for training and development, and for prevention and protection records. But the service should make sure its systems are improving effectiveness and efficiency as intended. This was an area for improvement in our last inspection, and that area for improvement remains.

We found the ICT service is improving, with a more efficient service desk and an internal ICT liaison arrangement, pairing departments with specific ICT staff members. There is a strategy and business case to plan investment in ICT. The Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Essex approved the scope and funding of this project in March 2021, and the service is working on the detail.

The service must make sure it has the capacity and capability it needs to achieve sustainable change, and that it routinely seeks opportunities to work with others to improve efficiency and give better services in the future.

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

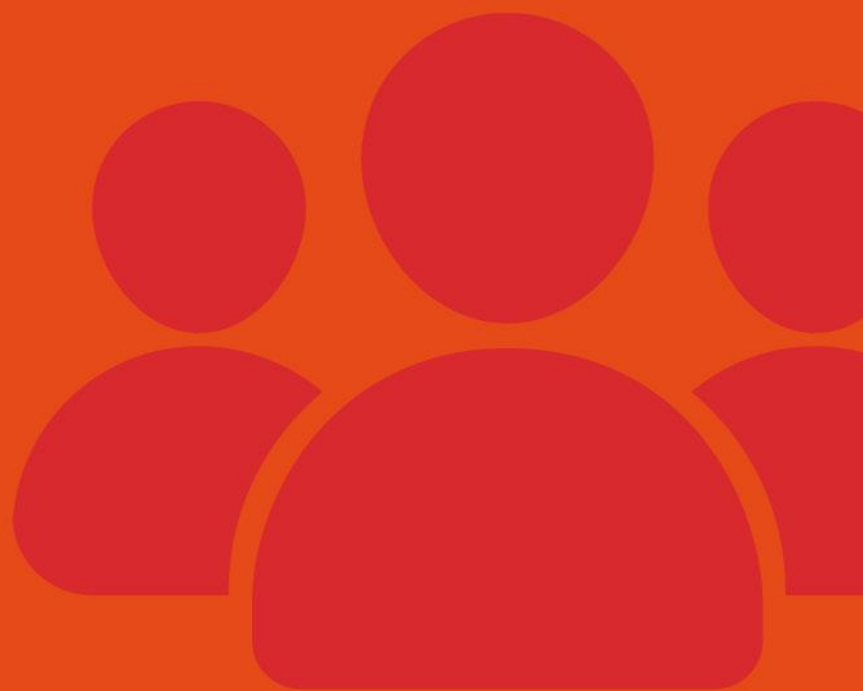
The service actively considers and exploits opportunities for generating extra income.

It has secured some external funding and support to bring about improvements to the service it gives the public. This includes:

- sponsorship from several sources for its Firebreak intervention programme;
- the donation of a car from a manufacturer;
- the donation of fire bikes from a local motorcycle dealer;
- support from Essex Police for the service's education programme; and
- a local authority grant for the provision of smoke alarms.

The service has recently ceased its trading arm as it found the risks and responsibilities outweighed the benefits. The company is in the process of voluntary liquidation.

People



How well does the service look after its people?



Requires improvement

Summary

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

We are encouraged to find that the culture of the service is improving since our last inspection, as it continues to address previous failings. Senior leaders have been more visible to staff and are driving the change. But there is still lots more work to do, for example, the service needs to make sure that its values are fully embedded, and that staff feel able and supported to challenge unacceptable behaviour. The service must review the effectiveness of its policies and do more to tackle bullying, harassment and discrimination. More needs doing to improve support for victims and to remove barriers to reporting problems.

The service must do more to increase the diversity of its workforce. More work is needed to address disproportionality in recruitment and retention to make the workforce representative of the community.

Workforce planning must take full account of the skills and capabilities needed for the service to be able to meet the requirements of its IRMP. Staff need to be appropriately trained, particularly to carry out their managerial responsibilities, and should have easy access to resources. Staff in specialist roles should be afforded opportunities to undertake [continuing professional development](#). The service doesn't manage temporary promotions well. We found evidence of them being in place for longer than they should be.

The service should improve how it manages career pathways and make sure its processes to identify, develop and support high-potential staff and aspiring leaders are open and fair.

Promoting the right values and culture



Requires improvement (2019: Inadequate)

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. Health and safety should be promoted effectively, and staff should have access to a range of wellbeing support that can be tailored to their individual needs.

Areas for improvement

- The service should make sure all staff understand and demonstrate its values.
- The service should monitor secondary contracts to make sure working hours are not exceeded.
- The service should make sure that its absence/attendance procedures are consistently applied.

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

The culture is improving, but the service has more work to do

We are encouraged by the cultural improvements the service has made since our last inspection. The service has a clearly defined set of values, which are now more widely understood, but we found places where they are not fully embedded and we are keen to see sustained progress over the long term.

There is a better working culture in parts of the service, with staff more engaged in decisions that affect them. Staff in fire stations gave examples of the most senior leaders being more visible and listening to their concerns and suggestions.

The experiences of individuals at fire stations depend on the behaviours of others. We found that the service doesn't always challenge unacceptable behaviours that aren't in line with its values, and middle managers don't always deal with problems as they arise. These include accounts of bullying. This affects staff wellbeing.

Staff told us there are still some divisions between different teams, such as between [on-call](#) and [wholetime](#) members of staff, and those who are operational and non-operational.

The service should make sure the right information and support is available to staff, so it empowers them to be confident to challenge negative behaviours when they happen.

The service needs to do more to make sure it effectively implements the new national [Core Code of Ethics](#).

The service promotes mental and physical health and wellbeing

The service has effective wellbeing policies available to staff, who understand the policies well. A significant range of wellbeing support is available to support both physical and mental health. For example, the service offers [trauma risk management](#) following significant incidents. Support is available through line managers, [occupational health](#), counselling and therapy, including cognitive behaviour training. The service also provides a mental health first aid course, fitness testing, medicals and health screening.

When pandemic restrictions meant some staff were working remotely, the service adopted a way of communicating with them digitally.

The service has Dignity at Work Champions, who offer peer support to staff. Not all staff were aware of this, but those who have used the support – and those who offer it as champions – spoke positively about the initiative.

Most staff understand and have confidence in the wellbeing support processes available. Of the respondents to our survey, 93 percent (340 of 366) told us they feel able to access services to support their mental wellbeing.

We found that managers understand the welfare arrangements for staff and can implement these when needed. In our survey, 80 percent (294 of 366) of respondents told us they had had a conversation about their health and wellbeing with their manager. The majority of these (251 of 294) have a conversation at least once a month. But this still leaves 20 percent of respondents who have not had a conversation at all.

Staff understand and have confidence in health and safety policies

The service continues to have effective health and safety policies and procedures, which staff understand well. It learns from health and safety events and has reporting and monitoring mechanisms.

These policies and procedures are readily available and promoted well to all staff. The service updates staff on health and safety issues through bulletins, which are now available through the pdrPro system (software for fire and rescue services).

Our survey showed that 92 percent (338 of 366) of respondents felt their personal safety and welfare were treated seriously at work. Representative bodies agree the service manages the health and safety of its staff well. Both staff and the representative bodies who replied to our survey have confidence in the service's approach to health and safety.

A health and safety issue was raised by staff on several occasions that breathing apparatus communications are not as reliable or effective as they could be. This included reports of muffled sounds, interference and low range. The service should make sure its breathing apparatus communication equipment is fit for purpose and staff have confidence in it.

The service needs to make sure it adheres to working time regulations

During our last inspection, we found the service didn't adequately oversee staff working hours. And there was a lack of reliable information about secondary employment. This is despite the service having a policy on working time restrictions for people employed on multiple contracts.

Secondary employment is low compared to other fire and rescue services. At 31 March 2021, 0.2 percent of wholetime firefighters had a dual contract with another service, 15.4 percent had a dual contract in Essex, and 6.6 percent had other external employment.

In this inspection, we found local managers were aware of the policy. But we are still not confident the service can be sure all staff are well rested and safe to work. It also needs to be sure it is adhering to the [Working Time Regulations 1998](#).

The service manages and records absence inconsistently

The service must make sure it applies its absence management policy consistently. Staff and managers don't widely understand the policy, and there is no equality impact assessment for it. The service needs to make sure it trains staff with absence management responsibilities so they can carry out their duties competently.

As part of our inspection, we analysed some case files to consider how the service manages and supports staff through absence. From those files, we found several inconsistencies in the way the service carries out and records return to work interviews, and in the way it records contact during absence.

The service actively monitors sickness absence trends, and human resources and managers now have a more collaborative approach to managing absence. In the year ending 31 March 2021, the number of days or shifts lost to long-term sickness was 28 percent lower than during the previous 12 months (8,223 compared to 11,467). The number of days or shifts lost to short-term sickness was 46 percent lower than during the previous year (2,631 compared to 4,896).

Getting the right people with the right skills



Requires improvement (2019: 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 IRMPs, sets out their current and future skills requirements and addresses

capability gaps. They should supplement this with a culture of continuous improvement that includes appropriate learning and development throughout the service.

Areas for improvement

- The service should make sure its workforce plan takes full account of the necessary skills and capabilities to carry out the IRMP.
- The service needs to assure itself that all staff are appropriately trained for their role. It needs to ensure all staff keep their skills up to date and have a consistent method of recording when they have received training.

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

The service should make sure it has the skills and capabilities it needs

The service does some workforce planning, but it doesn't take full account of the skills and capabilities it needs to be able to meet the requirements of its IRMP. We found limited evidence that the service's planning allows it to fully consider workforce skills and overcome any gaps in capability. For example, there are skills shortages in prevention and protection work, and limited training capacity for control staff.

Since our last inspection, the service has started using pdrPro, a system for managing workforce capabilities. It is introducing the system in phases. Information from before April 2021 is held in the Task system, which the service used before moving to pdrPro.

The service doesn't manage temporary promotions well, and we found evidence of them being in place for longer than they should be. At 31 March 2021, 111 people were on temporary promotions. The average length of these temporary promotions was 420 days, with the longest being 1,812 days.

The service must make sure succession planning meets its needs and enables continuity in critical roles, including on-call staff. Recruitment, promotion and progression processes must be effective and carried out at the right pace. The service can't yet be sure it has an accurate understanding of the skills and competence of all its staff.

The service needs to improve its culture of learning and development

Although the service provides some learning and development, it doesn't always meet the needs of staff or indeed the service. For example, there is no formal exercise programme for control staff and senior officers.

There aren't good enough processes in place to let staff access the resources they need to do their job well. The service provides general information inconsistently, meaning staff don't always have access to it. Some staff in specialist roles (both operational and non-operational) say they struggle to maintain competence and carry out continuing professional development for their areas of expertise.

The training records we reviewed showed the service is planning and recording risk-critical operational training. But the service doesn't have a consistent approach to training staff in their managerial duties, such as [safeguarding](#), equality, diversity and inclusion, and absence management.

The service introduced a Leadership, Resourcing and Succession process in early 2021. This includes assessments and individual development plans for staff working towards promotion. This process is new, and so far the take-up has mostly been by operational staff. At the time of our inspection, there were no examples of anyone having completed their development and progressing through to the resource pool for deployment to other roles.

Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity



Requires improvement (2019: Requires improvement)

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

Creating a more representative workforce will provide huge benefits for fire and rescue services. This includes greater access to talent and different ways of thinking, and improved understanding of and engagement with their local communities. Each service should make sure equality, diversity and inclusion are firmly understood and demonstrated throughout the organisation. This includes successfully taking steps to remove inequality and making progress to improve fairness, diversity and inclusion at all levels of the service. It should proactively seek and respond to feedback from staff and make sure any action taken is meaningful.

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.
- The service should review how effective its policy on bullying, harassment and discrimination is in reducing unacceptable behaviour towards its staff.
- The service should make improvements to the way it collects equality data to better understand its workforce demographic and needs.
- 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.

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

The service should continue improving how it seeks and acts on staff feedback and challenge

The service has made some progress in addressing the area for improvement established in 2019 relating to improving its engagement with staff. Senior leaders are keen to hear feedback from staff. The service does have some ways of gathering staff feedback, such as:

- the staff survey;
- independently run focus groups;
- a portal the service used when it developed its values and behaviours;
- staff networks; and
- staff representative bodies.

But staff say they don't feel well informed about outcomes or changes as a result of their feedback. In the staff survey, only 55 percent of staff felt confident in the feedback mechanisms.

We are pleased to find improvements in the way the service and representative bodies engage. It has developed a Working Well Together initiative and a Failure to Agree mechanism. There are also bi-monthly Joint Negotiation and Consultation Committee meetings between service managers and local representative bodies.

The service must do more to tackle bullying, harassment and discrimination

The service has produced a new grievance policy since our last inspection. But it could go further to improve how well staff understand bullying, harassment and discrimination, including their own responsibilities for eliminating it. Staff told us there are still problems caused by senior colleagues, as well as a lack of support for victims and barriers to reporting. They also said the service doesn't resolve issues quickly enough.

In our survey, 14 percent of respondents (53 staff members) told us they had been subject to bullying or harassment over the past year. And 25 percent (92 staff members) said they had been discriminated against in the same period. Out of those 92 people, 48 hadn't reported the discrimination. Reasons they cited for not reporting this behaviour to the service included feeling like nothing would happen, and fear of victimisation and labelling.

Although the service does have clear policies and procedures, staff have limited confidence in its ability to deal effectively with cases of bullying, harassment and discrimination, as well as with grievances and discipline. In the survey, staff members reported the service took no action in 23 of 44 bullying and harassment cases that had been formally or informally raised with it. The service should review how effective its policies are.

The service needs to do more to address disproportionality in recruitment and retention

Senior leaders show willingness to make the workforce more representative. But the service's limited equality data means it hasn't yet made enough progress in improving both race and gender diversity throughout the service.

We found that the service has directed recruitment campaigns at under-represented groups. For example, it has information on a dedicated recruitment site with case studies and videos to promote and improve the diversity of the workforce. As well as general virtual Q&A sessions with local people, it has also held some sessions specifically for women and members of the community from ethnic minority backgrounds. A recent diversity review has produced recommendations on how the service can improve.

At 31 March 2020, only 2.5 percent of staff members stated their ethnicity as from ethnic minority backgrounds, compared to 6.8 percent of the local population. Also at 31 March 2020, 16 percent of staff members declared as female, as did 4.2 percent of firefighters. At 31 March 2020, 44.8 percent of staff hadn't declare their ethnicity, so the service couldn't fully understand its diversity. We are pleased to see that data for 31 March 2021 shows this value has decreased to 24.2 percent.

The service needs to encourage applicants from diverse backgrounds into middle and senior-level positions. It isn't making the most of opportunities to make its workforce more representative. This was an area for improvement from our last inspection, and it remains after this inspection. The service could make better use of exit interviews to understand why staff leave the organisation. It could then learn from this.

The service must keep improving its approach to equality, diversity and inclusion

The service must make sure the workforce understands how it should continue to embed equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). It should ensure it can offer the right services to its communities, and that it can support staff with [protected characteristics](#).

Equality data has improved since our last inspection, but it is still not as complete as it could be, so the service still doesn't have a good understanding of EDI issues. Since our last inspection, it has started assessing equality impact through its people impact assessments. But it doesn't always properly assess or act on the impact on people with protected characteristics. The service hasn't completed people impact assessments for many of its main policies yet. It could be engaging more with internal and external networks to guide this work.

So it can improve its approach to EDI, the service must make sure staff, particularly managers, are competent, skilled and willing to challenge negative behaviours and inappropriate use of language. The service has tried to improve its communication to the workforce, and it launched a monthly newsletter called *Inclusion Insights* in April 2021. Also, specific staff networking groups feed into the Inclusion and Diversity Action Group, which is chaired by the chief fire officer.

The service has networking forums for under-represented groups. These are actively used to contribute to issues such as recruitment, retention, and development.

But we found there are still examples of people reporting being treated unfairly, including those with protected characteristics. Staff cite a lack of managerial action in some of these cases.

The service hasn't clearly set EDI training requirements in policy, and it can't be sure managers are competent in identifying issues and responding well when they arise.

Managing performance and developing leaders



Requires improvement (2019: Good)

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

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

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.

The service has a good individual performance management process

There is a good performance management system in place, which allows the service to effectively develop and assess the individual performance of all staff. Staff have annual appraisals with a six-monthly review. We are pleased to see there has been an increase in the number of completed appraisals since our last inspection. The figure is now 79 percent for wholetime staff, 84 percent for on-call staff, 82 percent for control staff and 81 percent for support staff.

In our staff survey, 90 percent (329 of 366) of respondents reported that they have had a personal development review in the past 12 months, and 65 percent (213 of 329) of respondents felt that the reviews were meaningful. Staff feel confident in the service's performance and development arrangements.

The service needs to ensure fairness in recruitment and promotion processes

The service needs to do more to make sure and demonstrate its recruitment and promotion processes are fair. Our analysis of promotion processes found the service carries out interviews and assessments in accordance with the selection criteria, and it records and retains information. But there is a distinct lack of staff confidence in promotion processes being applied consistently, and not all staff clearly understand career pathways and opportunities.

On-call supervisory managers can't transfer on to the wholetime duty system at the same level. This means the service doesn't make full use of these existing skills.

The service needs to improve how it develops leadership and high-potential staff

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

The service has some talent management schemes in place to develop leaders and high-potential staff, such as the Leadership, Resourcing and Succession process, but it needs to improve the accessibility of these schemes. For example, there aren't enough ways of identifying and removing barriers for people with specific learning needs. This has resulted in inconsistencies, and it undermines staff perception of fairness in the processes.

The service should consider putting in place more formal arrangements to identify and support members of staff to become senior leaders. There is a significant gap in its succession planning. This area for improvement, established in our last inspection, still needs to be addressed.

