

Output Report for Fire and Rescue Plan 2019-24

February 2024

This report is provided to members of the Police, Fire and Crime Panel to provide a high-level summary of activity undertaken throughout the implementation of the Fire and Rescue Plan that has worked well or shows opportunity for improvement. The report is broken down into chapters aligned with the priorities and objectives specified in the Fire and Rescue Plan 2019-24.

The Fire and Rescue Plan 2019-24 can be found here: [ECFRS Fire and Rescue Plan 2019-24](#)

The chapters are as follows:

- Creating a positive culture
- Protection

Creating a positive culture

“To have a safe and diverse workforce who we enable to perform well in a supportive culture underpinned by excellent training.”

Introduction

Essex County Fire and Rescue Service has previously been beset by a number of serious incidents that indicated the presence of a troubling and challenging culture, with allegations of bullying and intimidation, and the suicides of two serving firefighters. The then Essex Fire and Rescue Authority (FRA) took the positive and proactive decision to seek independent help to address the issues faced and a Review of Culture by Irene Lucas, CBE was conducted in 2015. Despite the work undertaken to improve culture within the service, at the time the PFCC took on the governance of fire and rescue, there was still a significant way to go. Creating a positive culture was placed at the very core of the Fire and Rescue Plan 2019-24.

The 2018/19 HMICFRS effectiveness, efficiency and people inspection issued a cause for concern against the judgement, ‘How well does the fire and rescue service promote its values and cultures?’. The cause for concern noted a clear intent from senior officers to improve culture, with progression noted. However, despite this, there was evidence of behaviours found at that time that were not in line with the service’s values.

Positive progress has been made since the publication of the Fire and Rescue Plan 2019-24, and the cause for concern was lifted through the HMICFRS effectiveness, efficiency and people inspection 2021/22. While it was acknowledged there was more work to be done, cultural improvements were recognised, alongside a clearly defined set of values. The inspection highlighted the difference between implementation and embedding, recognising that embedding a lasting, positive cultural change takes time.

Essex County Fire and Rescue Service has worked hard under the Fire and Rescue Plan to create a positive culture and diverse workforce that is reflective of the communities of Essex. The PFCC and the service have invested in creating a strong, effective leadership team, and continued to invest in staff with priorities around recruitment, retention, training, and development. The service has seen significant improvement in the development of a positive culture and has, at the heart of its strategy, put people first by consulting, involving, and informing colleagues to support lasting, meaningful change. Cultural change has been embedded in the service's values and behaviours through recognition, communication, continuous improvement, developing manager self-awareness, and increasing diversity.

There is a clear link between culture and the national Core Code of Ethics, with dignity and respect, leadership and equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) central ethical principles.

Activity and Progress

The publication and implementation of the Fire and Rescue Plan has seen the service create a People Strategy 2020-2024, a key mechanism for delivering both the Plan priorities and the Integrated Risk Management Plan. The People Strategy describes how the service has continued to develop, value, attract, engage and care for its people so that it has a safe and diverse workforce which is enabled to perform well in a supportive culture, underpinned by excellent training. The Strategy was built on the core values of the service and has been instrumental to implementing positive cultural change. Included within the strategy is a Continued Culture Change Strategy that sets out the approach to continuously developing a positive culture. Detailed reports on the implementation of the People Strategy were presented to the Police, Fire and Crime Panel's Ethics and Integrity Sub-Committee in March and September 2023.

In 2022, HMICFRS published the findings of its 2021/22 Effectiveness, Efficiency and People inspection of Essex County Fire and Rescue Service. In the area of 'People', the inspectorate acknowledged the work the service had implemented to improve culture since the previous inspection in 2018/19. However, a grade of 'requires improvement' was awarded, showing that, although progress had been made, there is still a way to go. The service is awaiting the outcome from the latest 2023/25 tranche of inspections, and we hope to see more progress still.

It is positive to note that, when HMICFRS published a national spotlight report in 2023 on values and culture in fire and rescue services, most of the recommendations that applied to ECFRS were already in place or being actioned as a result of the People Strategy. This is a welcome sign of how far positive cultural change has been instilled in the service. The service has also taken the opportunity for learning further, recognising the impacts other high-profile reviews, such as Baroness Casey's review of the Metropolitan Police Service, the HMICFRS inspection of Vetting, Misconduct and Misogyny in the Police Service, and the Independent Culture Review of London Fire Brigade, have on emergency services generally. This has led to the service identifying themes and recommendations from these reviews that also provide opportunity for improvement within the service.

These recommendations relate to safer recruitment, disclosure and barring, the Cultural Maturity Model, and mapping and managing allegations. Progress has been made against each recommendation and continues to be monitored in line with the People Strategy.

Leadership and development are strong, with growing investment in and opportunities for staff. The Leadership, Resourcing and Succession (LRS) Pool is providing successful candidates for 77% of all roles. The LRS is essential in meeting current and future demand for skills and capacity. Access to the LRS by non-operational colleagues has doubled year on year since 2020.

Keeping the drive for recruitment while striving to attract a diverse workforce is also an area the service has made progress on. The Positive Action Plan 2022 – 2023 has seen an increase in the number of female starters in the service (21%, up from 16% in 2020/21) and starters of a minority ethnic background (6.4%, up from 2.8% in 2020/21). Analysis of our wholetime recruitment information confirms there is no disproportionate drop off for any individual group with a protected characteristic throughout the process (between 2021 and 2023, 11% of applicants were female and 11% of offers were to females, while 8% of applicants were from non-White British ethnicity and 8% of offers were to non-White British candidates). Positive action work is recognised by the Asian Fire Service Association (AFSA) and in 2023 ECFRS won the 2023 AFSA award for Positive Action, providing further confirmation and assurance of the quality and effectiveness of the Positive Action Plan.

Tackling bullying and discrimination has been key to developing a positive culture. An independent review conducted in 2022 of all grievance cases and allegations over the previous 12 months, including those which referenced bullying, harassment, criminal allegations, racism, misogyny, prejudicial and improper behaviour and misconduct, concluded that concerns had been managed appropriately and outcomes of the cases were considered to be broadly reasonable.

Conclusion

Progress made by the Essex County Fire and Rescue Service with developing a positive culture has been consistent and steady since the implementation of the Fire and Rescue Plan. Although activity to create cultural change has been implemented, embedding this cultural change is still a work in progress. Lasting, meaningful cultural change can take years to embed fully, but the service has been committed to achieving this, entrenching core values into activities delivered, and receiving a positive response and real indications of success.

Protection

“We will plan and provide effective and efficient prevention, protection and response activities, so the public continue to have trust and confidence in us.”

Introduction

Protection is fundamental to the Essex County Fire and Rescue Service, being a core activity to the Integrated Risk Management Plan and to deliver the priorities

within the Fire and Rescue Plan. The devastating Grenfell Tower fire in 2017 brought into focus the crucial role fire and rescue services can play in protection and prevention, creating safe communities and preventing tragedy from occurring in the first place. The inquiry that followed provided recommendations for fire and rescue services and saw the introduction of the Fire Safety (England) Regulations 2022. The service is committed to meeting the recommendations from the inquiry and presents action updates to the PFCC via the Performance and Resources Board.

Protection is closely linked to audit and enforcement. Fire and rescue services are responsible for ensuring that commercial properties are compliant with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. This responsibility discharged by the Protection Department educating Responsible Persons on their responsibilities, and then carrying out audits in line with our Risk Based Inspection Programme (RBIP). The service then has powers to take appropriate action where required, to get premises compliant and to get them safe. Through utilising the enforcement options available to us, we have seen buildings made safer throughout the county, undertaking vital work to keep Essex safe.

The PFCC and the service have continued to invest in Protection in challenging times such as those experienced through the COVID-19 pandemic, continuing to play a role in keeping communities safe. During the pandemic, the team quickly and confidently adapted to government guidelines to ensure vital prevention and protection activity could continue. The Protection team completed 7,202 jobs in 2020/21. This included 319 full audits and 2,293 desktop audits against premises. 99.6% of statutory consultations received were responded to within 15 working days by the team, demonstrating the service's ability to adapt and deliver.

The service holds an important role within enforcement, ensuring protection is carried out and keeping Essex a safe place to live, work and visit.

Activity and Progress

In the 2019, HMICFRS issued ECFRS a Cause of Concern for Protection, indicating that the service had insufficient resources to meet its risk-based inspection programme (RBIP), with partially skilled operational staff carrying out high risk visits. The service implemented work to revise the RBIP and understand how it could address the issues raised. In September 2022, ECFRS commissioned Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service and the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner to carry out a Peer Review of the Protection Cause of Concern ahead of the HMICFRS re-inspection in November 2022. The PFCC's office was instrumental in the review, providing feedback on progress made against the Cause for Concern and understanding what was yet to be delivered, and identifying evidence where required. The Inspectorate revisited the service in 2023, and while it did not discharge the Cause of Concern, it was pleased to see progress being made and the service's commitment demonstrated.

The implementation of the Protection Strategy 2020-24 supports delivery of this priority by creating a more integrated approach to fire safety, with work carried out by operational personnel. The strategy enables the service to use all its powers enabled

by legislation to minimise risk within regulated premises. The Protection Strategy has also supported work within the prevention and response strategies and has enabled the service to work collaboratively with partners, building public trust and confidence and maximising effective use of resources. This is essential to further identify and mitigate risk within our communities and to deliver against the priorities in the Fire and Rescue Plan.

The service has continued to review and refresh its approach to protection to ensure activities remain effective. In particular, the service has kept its Risk Based Inspection Programme (RBIP) under review as one of the key tools to achieve the strategy. The RBIP is designed to be data led, enabling the service to understand which premises pose the greatest level of risk and to target resources accordingly. To be able to deliver against the IRMP, the service has continually reviewed its inspection programme and regularly refreshed it to enable strong decision making, target resources effectively, and ensure delivery targets are met. During 2022-2023, the service also restructured its Fire Protection team to support the additional resource requirements of new legislation and national Fire Standards. This enabled the service to identify and deliver more inspections than in previous years, with 1,974 risk-based inspection audits completed. This is up significantly from 824 inspections conducted in 2019/2020, a 139.6% increase.

As outlined in the RBIP, the commitment is to ensure that all high-risk premises are visited by 31/03/2028, and all very high-risk premises are visited by 31/03/2026. To support these objectives, a scenario planning tool has been developed for the Protection team to help it strategically plan future visits. The tool considers anticipated staffing levels and activity, and projects that high-risk visits will be completed significantly ahead of the RBIP target (by 31/07/2026), and very high-risk premises will also be completed ahead of the target date (by 31/01/2026). The plan assumes that each inspecting officer will perform a minimum of six visits per month. When the average number of visits completed by inspecting officers over the past three months (which is 6.9) is factored in, the revised forecast indicates that both high-risk and very high-risk premises will be completed well within target.

The service has demonstrated proactive avenues of working, engaging with businesses and Essex business forums such as the Essex Chamber of Commerce. Protection teams look to reduce the impact of fire in commercial premises, working closely with businesses, supporting them to meet their fire safety responsibilities, guiding them on how to meet regulations, and making sure protecting people from fire is their priority. Positive engagement has allowed the service to share specialist advice and knowledge with businesses, actively share learning, and enhance safety. These relationships have been crucial to ensure a helpful environment, where businesses actively engage with the service on new and emerging risks, allowing collaborative working to find a satisfactory solution.

As referenced above, the ECFRS Risk Based Inspection Programme identifies those premises which will be subject to a pre-planned visit by ECFRS personnel in order to check compliance with the requirements of the Order. With over 82,000 properties that currently fall within the scope of this work within Essex (as of November 2022), it

is recognised that attending all these properties to carry out audits or inspections is unrealistic. As such, a Business Engagement Team and Business Engagement Strategy 2023/24 have been implemented. The team has been working with Community Fire Risk Management Information System (CFRMIS) data to ensure that all Responsible Persons (RPs) are aware of the new regulations that came into force on January 23rd, 2023. All RPs received multiple letters from the service informing them of the changes in the regulations and what they would be required to do under these changes. The team has run several impact days, with 2,000 business engaged with between September and December 2023. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) around all activities under the Business Engagement Strategy are being developed so the Service can understand the pressures and demands of the team to allow for forward planning and progress tracking.

In 2022, the Essex County Fire and Rescue Service created a dedicated area of its website to provide guidance to property owners and an easy-to-follow form to allow information to be shared with the service easily and securely. This area also provides advice from the Business Engagement Team to encourage businesses to seek additional help.

Conclusion

Throughout the Fire and Rescue Plan implementation, Protection activity has been dedicated and positive, remaining a priority to the service even at challenging times. It is vital that work continues to build on the successful movements made, and so that the service can continue to deliver protection in the face of any future challenges.