

# Fire & Rescue Service 2021/22

## Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service



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# About this inspection

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This inspection is from our third round of inspections of fire and rescue services in England. We first inspected County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service in July 2019. We published 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.

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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 County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service.

## What inspection judgments mean

Our categories of graded judgment are:

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

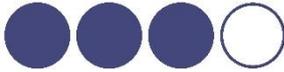
Good is our expected graded judgment for all fire and rescue services. It is based on policy, practice or performance that meet pre-defined grading criteria, which are informed by any relevant [national operational guidance](#) or standards.

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

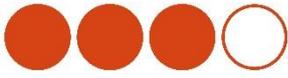
If we find shortcomings in the service, we will judge it as requires improvement.

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

# Overview

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

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

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

### HM Inspector's summary

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

Although the service is performing well, it needs to improve in some areas to provide a consistently good service.

I am pleased with the service's performance in keeping people safe and secure from fires and other risks. For example, the service has the quickest response times to [primary fires](#) among all predominately rural services across England. We were encouraged to find that the people identified as highest risk from fire receive a home fire safety revisit within 12 months, and that the service has a dedicated arson reduction team to tackle fire-setting behaviour.

We were pleased to see the service's progress since our 2019 inspection. Most of the areas for improvement identified have been addressed. We are pleased with the progress the service has made in the way it looks after its people, but there is still more to do in protection.

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

- the culture of the service has improved;
- staff have been continually productive;
- the service has further developed its apprenticeship programme; but
- the service needs to improve in protection.

The service continues to have well-defined values that are understood by staff. It has developed several ways to engage with staff on issues and decisions that affect them. For example, the chief fire officer has visited every [watch](#) this year. We have identified an innovative practice with the service developing a new breathing apparatus washing facility which removes the products of combustion from the breathing apparatus equipment. This further supports the aim of keeping operational staff safe.

We are impressed with the service's productivity. A large proportion of activities are completed by firefighters. The service's rates of [home fire safety visits](#) and fire safety audits is much higher than the England rate.

The service has an effective and successful apprenticeship programme which we have identified as an innovative practice. The apprentices have been recruited to roles across the service, including firefighters, [fire control](#) and in workshops. We were told this has helped positively change the organisation's culture. In the last cohort, 50 percent of firefighter apprentices were women and 25 percent from an ethnic minority background.

Despite the many positives, the service can still improve in some areas. We found that it doesn't always have the ability to investigate alleged fire safety offences with a view to prosecution. We were also surprised to find that once prohibition notices are served, most aren't followed up regularly to check compliance.

Overall, the service has improved since our last inspection, which is reflected in the gradings. We look forward to seeing how the service builds on this improvement in our next inspection.



**Roy Wilsher**

HM Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

# Service in numbers



## Response

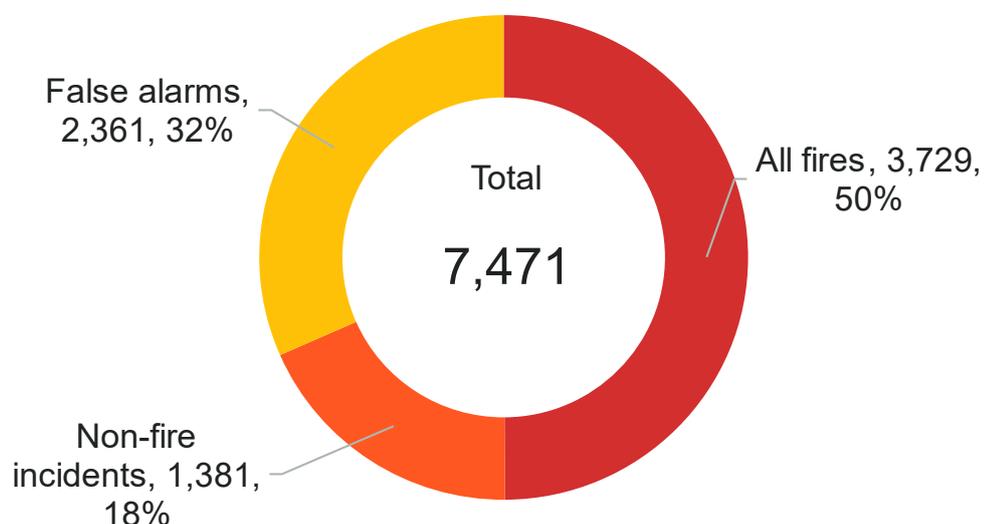
	Durham & Darlington	England
Incidents attended per 1,000 population Year ending 31 December 2021	11.66	9.82
Home fire safety checks carried out by fire and rescue service per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2021	7.56	4.47
Fire safety audits per 100 known premises Year ending 31 March 2021	6.12	1.70
Average availability of pumps Year ending 31 March 2021	89.1%	86.4%



## Cost

Firefighter cost per person Year ending 31 March 2021	£30.98	£25.02
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### Incidents attended in the year to 31 December 2021





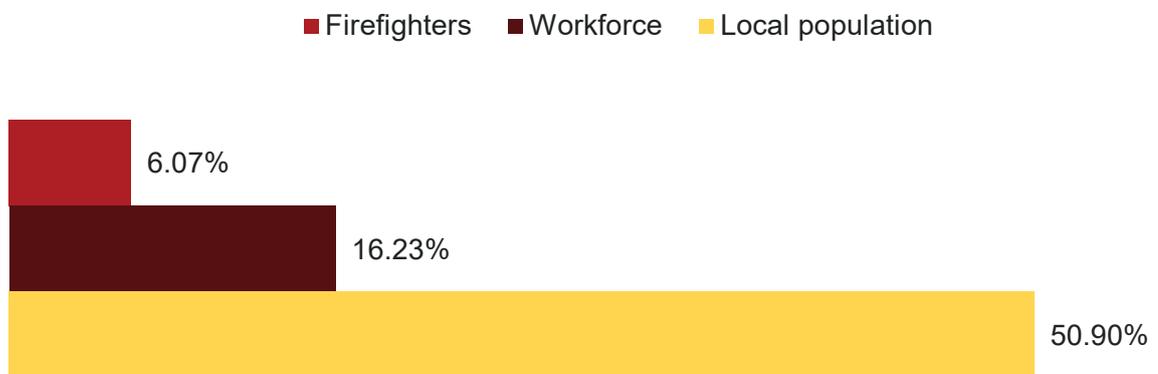
## Workforce

Durham &  
Darlington

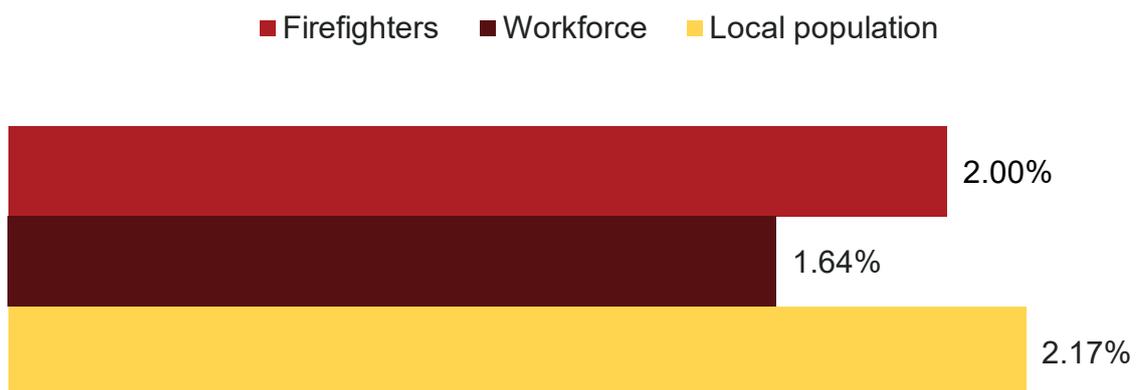
England

Five-year change in total workforce 2016 to 2021	5.40%	-1.60%
Number of firefighters per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2021	0.77	0.62
Percentage of firefighters who are wholetime Year ending 31 March 2021	61.1%	64.4%

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



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



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

# Effectiveness



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



**Good**

## Summary

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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. County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service's overall effectiveness is good.

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We are encouraged with the overall progress that County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service has made since our last inspection in effectiveness, but more could be done in some areas. The service has published its new community risk management plan (CRMP) 2022–2025 and its community risk profile document. It describes how prevention, protection and response activity is resourced to mitigate or reduce the risks and threats the community faces, both now and in the future.

Prevention activity is clearly prioritised using a risk-based approach towards people most at risk. We were pleased to find that the highest risk people receive a revisit within 12 months and that the service has a dedicated arson reduction team to tackle fire-setting behaviour.

As of 31 March 2021, the service's response time to [primary fires](#) was 8 minutes and 34 seconds. This is the fastest among all predominately rural services across England. For operational learning, we were impressed with the 'talking heads' videos the service produces following significant incidents to ensure lessons are learned for future response.

Despite the many positives, we identified areas where the service can further improve. The process to obtain site-specific risk information (SSRI) could be further enhanced

as we found inaccuracies in some records we sampled. We found that it doesn't always have the ability to investigate alleged fire safety offences with a view to prosecution. We were also surprised that when the service serves prohibition notices to restrict or prohibit the use of a building because of significant fire safety concerns, most aren't followed up regularly to check compliance.

## Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies



### Good (2019: Requires improvement)

County Durham and Darlington 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 its firefighters have good access to relevant site-specific 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 is good at identifying risk

County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service has assessed an appropriate range of risks and threats after a thorough integrated risk management planning process. In our last inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should ensure its [integrated risk management plan \(IRMP\)](#), which the service calls its community risk management plan (CRMP), is informed by a comprehensive understanding of current and future risk. Encouragingly, the service has addressed this by developing a clear community risk profile that identifies current and emerging risks. This is refreshed annually.

When assessing risk, it has considered relevant information collected from a broad range of internal and external sources and datasets. This includes data from the national risk register, census data and information from external organisations. When appropriate, the service has consulted and undertaken constructive dialogue with communities and others such as local authorities and other emergency services to both understand the risk and explain how it intends to mitigate it.

## **The service has an effective community risk management plan**

After assessing relevant risks, the service has recorded its findings in an easily understood CRMP. This plan describes how prevention, protection and response activity is to be resourced to mitigate or reduce the risks and threats the community faces, both now and in the future. This approach is proving effective in prevention and response, but more work is needed in protection. The CRMP sets out the six strategic priorities:

- emergency response;
- business fire safety;
- community safety;
- value for money;
- working together; and
- our people, our way.

The plan is updated each year and it describes the service's achievements in the last 12 months. The service provides comprehensive information to the public about its performance that is regularly updated, such as the number of fire incidents attended.

## **There is more to do in improving the accuracy of its site-specific risk information**

The service routinely collects and updates the information it has about the people, places and threats it has identified as being at greatest risk. The CRMP details the 20 risks the service has identified. This includes road vehicle fires, as the service has one of the highest rates of primary fires in England.

An area identified for improvement from our first inspection in 2019 was that the service should ensure its firefighters have good access to relevant and up-to-date SSRI. We were encouraged to find that the service has improved its approach to the SSRI process, but more work is needed and this remains an area for improvement.

As part of our inspection, we reviewed a small sample of SSRI records. We found that some contained inaccuracies. For example, one record we sampled had the incorrect number of floors displayed. We also found that operational staff had a limited understanding of whether lower-risk information needs to be recorded, such as oxygen users in a home.

## **Risk information is shared across departments, but this should be more structured**

Risk information is readily available for the service's prevention, protection and response staff, which enables it to identify, reduce and mitigate risk effectively. Where appropriate, risk information is passed on to other organisations, such as local authorities and other emergency services.

During our inspection, we found that some staff would email or telephone the relevant department to share information about risks that have been identified. The service would benefit from having a more structured approach to sharing risk information to make sure all the relevant people and departments are included. This is also the case for urgent risk information, which is sent by email. We found that supervisory managers cascade this information to their teams, but it wasn't clear how the service ensures the information is read and understood by staff on annual leave or returning from absence. The service should consider improving the way it records this.

The service routinely updates risk assessments and uses feedback from local and national operational activity to inform its planning assumptions. It also shares learning nationally.

### **The service has responded well to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry**

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

County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service has responded positively and proactively to learning from this tragedy. Although the service doesn't have any high-rise residential premises, the service has assessed the risk of each building with four floors or more.

It has carried out a fire safety audit and collected and passed relevant risk information to its prevention, protection and response teams about buildings identified as high risk.

### **Preventing fires and other risks**



#### **Good (2019: Good)**

County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service is good at preventing fires and other risks.

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

### **Area for improvement**

The service should implement a formal process that routinely checks the quality of home fire safety visits so that it can assure itself staff complete them to a consistent standard.

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

### **The community safety strategy is aligned to the community risk management plan**

The service's community safety strategy is clearly linked to the risks identified in its CRMP. This includes the service's aim to reduce deliberate fires, as these are much higher in the north-east compared to other parts of England.

The service's teams work well together and with other relevant organisations on prevention, and it shares relevant information when needed. Information is used to adjust planning assumptions and direct activity between the service's prevention, protection and response functions. For example, where hoarding is identified, alerts are provided to inform firefighters of the increased risk, but some staff told us this is completed via email or telephone. The service would benefit from taking a more structured approach.

### **Prevention activities were managed well during the pandemic**

We considered how the service had adapted its prevention work during our COVID-19 specific inspection in November 2020. At that time, we found it had adapted its public prevention work appropriately. The service continued its prevention work by completing face-to-face [home fire safety visits](#) to those people it considered to be high risk on a risk-assessed basis, and it introduced an option of assessment and advice by telephone. Since then, we are encouraged to find that all outstanding home fire safety visits have been completed.

### **The service targets its prevention activity according to risk**

Prevention activity is clearly prioritised using a risk-based approach towards people most at risk from fire and other emergencies. Since our last inspection, the service has further improved its screening process to make sure the most [vulnerable](#) are prioritised. It provides a range of interventions that it adapts to the level of risk in its communities. The community risk officers complete home fire safety visits for people identified as very high-risk and operational staff, including [on-call firefighters](#), complete visits to people identified as high or medium risk. This delivery model has proved successful as the number of home fire safety visits completed per 1,000 population is much higher than the England rate. We were also pleased to find that the highest-risk people are revisited within 12 months.

The service takes account of a broad range of information and data to target its prevention activity at vulnerable individuals and groups. It has an effective data sharing arrangement in place with various organisations, which enables it to provide details of property and occupants deemed higher risk. For example, housing association Livin Housing Limited is able to support residents further to reduce risk.

### **Staff have received enhanced prevention training since our last inspection**

In our previous inspection, we found that the service should ensure staff have received appropriate training on all the issues covered during a home safety visit. This was an area for improvement and we are pleased to find that staff have received the appropriate support to carry out these visits.

Staff told us they have the right skills and confidence to make these visits. These checks cover an appropriate range of hazards that can put vulnerable people at greater risk from fire and other emergencies. We also found that the specialist prevention staff receive regular continuous professional development, but this isn't recorded.

### **There is limited quality assurance of home fire safety visits**

We found that there isn't a formal process that routinely checks the quality of home safety visits. This means that the service can't assure itself that the visits are being completed to a consistent standard. Opportunities for learning that could improve service to the public are being missed.

### **The service responds well to safeguarding concerns**

The staff we spoke to, including on-call firefighters, were able to tell us what action they would take when responding to a [safeguarding](#) concern. They told us about occasions when they had identified safeguarding problems. They told us they feel confident and trained to act appropriately and promptly.

### **The service collaborates well with other organisations**

The service works with a wide range of other organisations such as Durham Constabulary and North East Ambulance Service to prevent fires and other emergencies. There are two community safety responders; a post that combines the roles of an on-call firefighter, a police community support officer and a first responder. This is an effective way for the service to share information with other emergency services.

We found good evidence that it routinely refers people at greatest risk to other organisations which may be better able to meet their needs. These organisations include housing providers and social care. Arrangements are in place to receive referrals from other organisations, such as the ambulance service. County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service acts appropriately on the referrals it receives. For example, we found evidence of home fire safety visit referrals from other

organisations being completed within the timescales the service sets itself. In addition, the service provides support, such as training, to those who provide referrals.

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. Data sharing arrangements are in place with other organisations to share relevant information about vulnerable individuals.

### **A dedicated arson reduction team tackles fire-setting behaviour**

The service area has one of the highest numbers of deliberate fires in England. For the year ending 31 March 2021, the service attended 409.2 deliberate fires per 100,000 population against the England average of 113.2.

There is a dedicated arson reduction team, which is providing a range of tailored activities to target and educate people of different ages who show signs of fire-setting behaviour. This includes its Phoenix Fire Champions programme, which educates school-aged children about setting fires.

When appropriate, it routinely shares information with other relevant organisations to support the prosecution of arsonists. The service has fire investigation officers who identify the cause of deliberate fires and provide this information to the police.

### **There is a well-resourced schools' programme in place**

We found that operational staff complete school visits to raise awareness of fire safety and wider prevention work, such as water safety. The schools are prioritised, depending on the local risk. The service provides a resource pack containing videos, smoke alarms and presentation material to firefighters, but some staff we spoke to hadn't been provided with the appropriate training in how to carry out school visits.

### **Prevention activities are evaluated**

In our last inspection, we said that the service should evaluate all its prevention work so it understands the benefits better. This was an area for improvement and we were pleased to find the service now has good evaluation tools in place. These tools measure how effective its work is so that it knows what works, and that its communities get prevention activity that meets their needs. For example, in December 2021, the service introduced a questionnaire which is completed by the occupant following a home fire safety visit. We were told by the service that 97 percent of occupants who completed the survey feel safer in their homes following the visit.

At the time of our inspection, the service had recently introduced 'behaviour change calls'. It contacts a range of occupants who received a home fire safety visit six months previously to see if there have been any behavioural changes. We look forward to seeing how this develops.

Prevention activities take account of feedback from the public, other organisations, and other parts of the service. Feedback is used by the service to inform its planning assumptions and amend future activity, so it is focused on what the community needs and what works.

## Protecting the public through fire regulation



### Requires improvement (2019: Requires improvement)

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

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

#### Area for improvement

The service should regularly monitor and check compliance of prohibition notices that have been served.

#### Area for improvement

The service should ensure that protection staff have and maintain the capacity and skill to use the full range of available enforcement powers, including the ability to prosecute where necessary.

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

### **The business fire safety strategy is aligned to the community risk management plan**

The service's business fire safety strategy is clearly linked to the risk it has identified in its CRMP.

Staff across the service are involved in this activity, with information effectively exchanged as needed. The service has continued to invest in the Level 3 Certificate in Fire Safety and its frontline supervisory managers, among other staff, hold this qualification. Its [wholetime firefighters](#) carry out fire safety audits in low and medium-risk premises. They make referrals to the specialist fire safety teams when necessary. Information is then used to adjust planning assumptions and

direct activity between the service's protection, prevention and response functions. This means resources are properly aligned to risk.

### **Protection activities were managed well during the pandemic**

We considered how the service had adapted its protection activity during our COVID-19 specific inspection in November 2020. At that time, we found it had adapted its protection work well. Since then, we are encouraged to find the service has returned to face-to-face inspections for its protection work, with appropriate measures in place.

### **Fire safety activity should be prioritised to the highest-risk premises**

The service's RBIP is focused on the service's highest risk buildings. At the time of our inspection, the service reviewed its highest-risk premises. We were told it had identified 28 premises as being highest risk, but this is only 0.17 percent of known premises in the service area.

The service aims to inspect all its highest-risk premises within three years. We recognise the pandemic will have affected the service's ability to carry out these fire safety audits. However, in the year to 31 March 2021, only 12 high-risk fire safety audits had been completed. This is a vast reduction from 256 fire safety audits of high-risk premises being completed in the year to 31 March 2019.

The service told us that in the year to 31 March 2022, 87 percent of the fire safety audits were completed by firefighters. In addition, we were told that 28 percent of fire safety audits result in an assessment that fire safety is unsatisfactory. We found most of these audits took place in shops or offices where the risks are generally lower. But this is a positive improvement from the previous year up to 31 March 2021, when only 11 percent of fire safety audits were unsatisfactory.

From the small selection of records completed by operational staff that we sampled, we found none identified any issues in the premises. Operational staff don't carry out fire safety audits in higher-risk premises, or premises which have a sleeping risk. The service should assure itself that this current approach is working, and that specialist fire safety staff are focusing on its highest-risk premises.

### **Recruitment and retention challenges are being addressed**

The service is working towards having enough qualified protection staff to meet the requirements of the service's RBIP. We were told that four out of seven specialist fire safety staff had left the service in the months leading up to our inspection, but they were replaced promptly. We recognise that it takes time for staff to be competent. But three out of seven specialist fire safety officers are currently in development so they can't work on the highest-risk premises or carry out enforcement work.

The operational staff are increasing referrals to the specialist fire safety team due to the audits being unsatisfactory as they can only address low and medium-risk issues. This results in the specialist fire safety teams' workloads increasing. This affects the service's other protection activities, such as checking compliance of prohibition notices. Once all the specialist fire safety team have the appropriate qualifications, it will have adequate resources and a larger pool of qualified people to meet future need.

### **The service's response to post-Grenfell building checks is proportionate**

County Durham and Darlington has no premises that fall within the scope of the post-Grenfell Building Risk Review Programme. But the service did identify premises it considered at risk. It has assessed the risk of every building that has four floors or more. However, we were told that these audits were carried out in isolation and limited information was passed on to response teams and control operators.

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

We reviewed a range of audits of different premises across the service. This included audits as part of the service's RBIP, after fires at premises where fire safety legislation applies and where [enforcement action](#) had been taken.

Not all the audits we reviewed were completed in a consistent, systematic way, or in line with the service's policies. For example, we found a prohibition notice served but the premises' file was missing some key information.

### **Quality assurance has improved, but specialist fire safety staff aren't yet part of the reviews**

In our previous inspection, we raised an area for improvement that the service should ensure it has an effective quality assurance process. We are pleased to find that a specialist fire safety officer will review a sample of records from each [watch](#) monthly with feedback sent by email. The service is further enhancing this process by completing the quality assurance check in person. Despite this process for operational staff, specialist fire safety staff haven't received the same reviews.

The service has introduced a new evaluation tool to measure the effectiveness of its activity and to make sure all sections of its communities get appropriate access to the protection services that meet their needs.

## **The service has more work to do to improve enforcement**

In our last inspection, we identified an area for improvement that the service should ensure protection staff have the capacity and skill to use the full range of its available enforcement powers. The number of formal notices served by the service has increased since our previous inspection. In the year to 31 March 2021, the service issued:

- 0 alteration notices;
- 90 informal notifications;
- 3 enforcement notices; and
- 3 prohibition notices.

The service has only prosecuted twice since 2016/17. Some staff told us that they try wherever possible to support businesses rather than pursue legal action. Although the service has experienced fire safety officers and has support from legal counsel, we found that some staff don't have the confidence to investigate alleged fire safety offences with a view to prosecution. This is mainly due to capacity and confidence as some specialist staff with the relevant experience have left the service. The service has a clear enforcement policy statement, but some guidance documents haven't been updated since 2009 and specialist fire safety staff were unaware of these processes.

The service has 24/7 availability to respond to dangerous conditions out of hours.

## **Prohibition notices aren't followed up to check compliance**

At the time of our inspection, there were 37 prohibition notices in force. We were surprised to find that most prohibition notices that have been served aren't followed up regularly to check compliance. There were several prohibition notices served several years ago with the last compliance checks carried out in 2018. This sends out the wrong message to those that don't take fire safety legislation seriously. The service should consider the use of alteration notices where necessary, as several prohibition notices currently in force were served over ten years ago.

## **The service provides good training for staff and has invested in its workforce**

Staff get the right training and work to appropriate accreditation. The service aligns staff training with nationally recognised standards and has invested in its operational workforce, with supervisory managers and new apprentices completing the Level 3 Certificate in Fire Safety. This was an area for improvement raised in our last inspection and we are pleased to find that operational staff have received the appropriate support to carry out fire safety audits competently.

### **The service works well with other enforcement agencies**

The service works closely with other enforcement agencies to regulate fire safety and routinely exchanges risk information with them. The service has carried out joint inspections where necessary. For example, a joint visit was carried out with the police, and local authority in a licensed premises.

### **The service responds to building and licensing consultations in a timely manner**

The service responds to all building consultations on time, so consistently meets its statutory responsibility to comment on fire safety arrangements at new and altered buildings. In the year to 31 March 2021, the service responded to 99 percent of building consultations within the time frame set. For the same period, 97 percent of licensing consultations were responded to on time.

### **Engagement with businesses has increased since our last inspection**

In our previous inspection, we raised as an area for improvement that the service should ensure it works proactively with local businesses. Since then, the service has developed a business fire safety communications and engagement plan. This details the different campaigns the service plans and currently runs. For example, a virtual fire safety seminar attracted a diverse range of organisations. The service uses its website and social media to promote fire safety information.

### **The number of unwanted fire signals the service attends has declined**

An effective risk-based approach is in place to manage the number of unwanted fire signals. The fire safety officers review incident data daily and there is a three-stage intervention process in place. The service has a successful charging policy in place for premises that have 3 or more unwanted fire signals in a 12-month period. It gets fewer calls because of this work. In the year to 31 December 2021, 32 percent of incidents were fire false alarms. Fewer unwanted calls mean that fire engines are available to respond to a genuine incident rather than responding to a false one. It also reduces the risk to the public if fewer fire engines travel at high speed on the roads.

## **Responding to fires and other emergencies**



### **Good (2019: Good)**

County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service is good 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.

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

### **Response resources are effectively reviewed and action taken to ensure their distribution is effective**

The service's CRMP is linked to the risks identified in its community risk profile. Its fire engines and response staff, as well as its working patterns, are designed and located to enable the service to respond flexibly to fires and other emergencies with the appropriate resources. For example, the service relocated a second wholetime fire engine from one fire station to another where the risks are greater. It also introduced a targeted response vehicle, which responds to incident types including secondary fires and false alarms.

### **New response standards have been introduced and the service is the fastest predominantly rural service in England**

There are no national response standards of performance for the public. But the service has set out its own response standards in its CRMP. The following standards were introduced in April 2022. It aims to attend:

- accidental dwelling fires within 8 minutes on 70 percent of occasions;
- non-domestic fires within 9 minutes on 70 percent of occasions; and
- road traffic collisions within 10 minutes on 70 percent of occasions.

The previous response standards, which were set in 2004, had been met except for non-domestic fires. The service aimed to attend 70 percent of all non-domestic fires within 8 minutes, but this was achieved on 67 percent of occasions.

Home Office data shows that in the year to 31 March 2021, the service's response time to primary fires was 8 minutes and 34 seconds. This is the fastest to respond among all predominately rural services across England.

### **The service uses its resources well, but on-call availability can still be improved**

In the year to 31 March 2022, the service's on-call availability was 67.9 percent. This has reduced from the previous year when it was 78.2 percent. During our inspection, staff often told us that on-call fire appliances weren't available. Wholetime fire engine availability was 100 percent. This means overall, fire engine availability was 84.0 percent, compared to 89.1 percent the previous year.

In our previous inspection, we raised as an area for improvement that the service should ensure it has an effective policy to determine how it aligns its resources to risk during periods of low fire engine availability. We found that the service has introduced new policies to deal with a range of events that require intervention, such as during periods of reduced staff availability.

It is encouraging to find the service uses its resources well. For example, the service can relocate its wholetime fire engine to a central position in the service area. This allows the fire engine to respond in a timely manner. This is a good example that the service is matching its resources to risk.

### **Training for incident commanders is good**

The service has trained incident commanders who are assessed regularly and properly. As of 31 March 2021, 100 percent of the 166 incident commanders it requires have been accredited. This enables the service to safely, assertively and effectively manage the whole range of incidents that it could face, from small and routine ones to complex multi-agency incidents.

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

We identified in our last inspection that the service should assure itself that it has procedures in place to record important operational decisions made at incidents and that these procedures are well understood by staff. We found this has been addressed. For example, analytical risk assessments are now photographed at the incident and then sent to a central team for storage.

### **Control staff are involved in operational response activities**

We are pleased to see control staff integrated into the service's command, training, exercise, debrief and quality assurance activity. We were given examples of how [fire control](#) staff have been involved in training and major incident exercises with operational staff. We were also pleased to find that control staff were involved in structured debriefs after incidents.

### **The service should test its ability to provide fire survival guidance to many callers simultaneously**

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

The service has provided training in fire survival guidance to its staff. While we recognise there aren't any high-rise premises in the service area, the service hasn't reviewed its ability to provide 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 mobile data terminals aren't reliable and risk information isn't always up to date**

We sampled a range of risk information, including what is in place for firefighters responding to incidents at high-risk buildings and what information is held by fire control.

The information we reviewed wasn't always up to date or accurate. For example, in one sample we reviewed a premises that was identified as medium risk, but had zero occupants recorded on the record.

We were told by operational staff that the [mobile data terminals](#) on fire engines were slow and clunky. They reported that the terminal had crashed on the way to an incident, which resulted in the crews not being able to access or retrieve critical risk information. The service has bought new terminals and they were due to be installed following our inspection.

## **Incident debriefs are effective and learning from incidents is used to improve future response**

An area for improvement identified in our last inspection was that the service should make sure it has an effective system enabling staff to use learning and debriefs from incidents to improve future operational response. We are pleased the service has addressed this. The service has a process to obtain learning from lower level to major incidents.

As part of the inspection, we reviewed a range of emergency incidents and training events. These included a mine rescue and a road traffic collision on the motorway. We were impressed with the 'talking heads' videos the service produces following a significant incident. These outline the emergency call to the control room, then follow events and decisions from when the fire appliance arrives to the incident's conclusion. All the staff that we spoke to during our inspection spoke positively about the videos. We look forward to seeing how this develops in the future.

We are pleased to see the service routinely follows its policies to assure itself that staff command incidents in line with operational guidance. Internal risk information is updated with the information received. Any operational learning obtained is sent to all operational staff by email and staff must confirm whether they have read and understood the learning.

We are encouraged to see the service is contributing towards, and acting on, learning from other fire and rescue services or operational learning gathered from other emergency services. National information and learning are reported to the operational assurance team, then communicated to the rest of the service.

## **The public is kept informed of ongoing incidents**

The service has good systems in place to inform the public about ongoing incidents and help keep them safe during and after incidents. The communications officers provide 24/7 cover, which helps keep the public informed, and they provide media training to middle managers and above. In addition, the team works well with the County Durham and Darlington [Local Resilience Forum \(LRF\)](#) to provide consistent messages to the public.

## **National operational guidance has been successfully implemented**

The service has been a forerunner nationally for implementing [national operational guidance](#). The service seconded an officer to the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#) during the development of the national standards. We were told this helped the service to implement the guidance. The service has also put in place a way to make sure risk assessments, procedures and training packages are regularly reviewed. At the time of our inspection, the service received praise from the National Fire Chiefs Council for its own implementation of the guidance and supporting 28 fire and rescue services across the country to do the same.

## **Responding to major and multi-agency incidents**



### **Good (2019: Good)**

County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service is good at responding to major and multi-agency incidents.

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

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

## **The service is well prepared to respond to major and multi-agency incidents**

The service has effectively anticipated and considered the reasonably foreseeable risks and threats it may face. These risks are listed in both local and national risk registers as part of its community risk management planning. For example, the service has plans to deal with flooding over a wide area and industrial fires.

It is also familiar with the significant risks that could be faced by neighbouring fire and rescue services that it might reasonably be asked to respond to in an emergency. Firefighters have access to risk information from neighbouring services. Risk information with neighbouring services is shared through a secure portal called [Resilience Direct](#), which all fire and rescue services have access to.

### **The service has good arrangements in place to respond to major incidents**

We reviewed the arrangements the service has in place to respond to different major incidents, including extreme weather events such as flooding.

The service declared a major incident when Storm Arwen occurred in November 2021. A multi-agency response was set up and we found the service responded to the incident effectively.

The service has good arrangements in place, which are well understood by staff. For example, the service has trained specialist operational staff in marauding terrorist attacks and aligned this response training to the latest joint operating principles. Fire control staff were familiar with what to do when a major incident is declared and they knew how to request [national resilience assets](#).

### **The service works effectively with neighbouring fire services**

The service can support other fire and rescue services responding to emergency incidents. The service has an arrangement with Cleveland Fire Brigade to use its incident command support unit when needed. It has additional formal arrangements in place with neighbouring services. It is intraoperable with these services and can form part of a multi-agency response.

### **Cross-border exercising takes place with neighbouring fire and rescue services**

The service has a cross-border exercise plan with neighbouring fire and rescue services so that they can work together effectively to keep the public safe. The plan includes the risks of major events at which the service could foreseeably provide support or request assistance from neighbouring services. We were encouraged to see that feedback from these exercises is used to inform risk information and service plans.

### **Principles for working with other emergency services are integrated into incident command**

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

The service provided strong evidence that it consistently follows these principles. This includes the application of JESIP in all command training and assessments, as well as including it in multi-agency training exercises and incidents.

## **The service works effectively with other organisations**

The service has good arrangements in place to respond to emergencies with other partners that make up the County Durham and Darlington Local Resilience Forum. These arrangements include planning and preparations for major incidents identified in its community risk profile.

The chief fire officer is the chair of the forum's strategic board, with the service also chairing the tactical business group and communication cell. We were told the service is seen as a valued partner of the forum. As part of the forum's response to COVID-19, the service chaired the tactical co-ordination group and the regional co-ordination group. The chief fire officer is the National Fire Chiefs Council lead for LRFs, representing forum chairs on a working group that set the direction and agenda for the national forum chairs' weekly COVID-19 call.

The service takes part in regular training events with other members of the LRF and uses the learning to develop planning assumptions about responding to major and multi-agency incidents. During the pandemic the service:

- saw over 150 staff volunteer for additional activities;
- co-ordinated community testing sites for Durham County Council, with over 7,000 tests conducted using more than 3,500 hours of support provided by the service; and
- supported vaccination centres by working over 12,000 hours as vaccinators, administering over 55,000 vaccinations to its communities.

## **National learning is shared regularly**

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

# Efficiency



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



## Good

### Summary

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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. County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service's overall efficiency is good.

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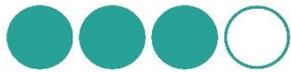
The service has made good progress in efficiency since our last inspection and has maintained its good grading. We are impressed with the service's productivity. A large proportion of prevention and protection work is completed by firefighters. The service's productivity rates of [home fire safety visits](#) and fire safety audits is much higher than the England rate.

The service successfully collaborates with others and has formal arrangements with other fire and rescue services. It shares several of its properties with other emergency services. The service has good business continuity arrangements in place, which were tested during Storm Arwen.

The service makes sure it gets value for money. The incident command support unit was due to be replaced at an approximate cost of £500,000. The service instead opted to have a formal arrangement with other services to use their incident command support unit when required. The service leadership team has been restructured since our last inspection, saving £250,000.

We found that the service has a successful apprenticeship programme and by using the apprenticeship levy to its full potential, it will make an approximate saving of over £1m. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, the trading arm generated £100,000 which has been paid into the [fire and rescue authority](#).

## Making best use of resources



### **Good (2019: Good)**

County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service is good at making best use of its resources.

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

The service's budget for 2022/23 is £30.202m. This is a 2.94 percent increase from the previous financial year.

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 clear rationale for its allocation of resources and targets them where needed**

We identified in our last inspection that the service needs to show a clear rationale for the resources allocated between prevention, protection and response activities. We are encouraged to see the improvements made. The service's financial and workforce plans, including allocating staff to prevention, protection and response reflect and are consistent with the risks and priorities identified in the CRMP. For example, the number of deliberate and [primary fires](#) in the service area, and throughout the north-east of England, is much higher compared to most other services. The service has focused resources on prevention activities that may reduce this.

Plans are built on sound scenarios. They help make sure the service is sustainable and are underpinned by financial controls that reduce the risk of misusing public money. Budget management and external audit arrangements are satisfactory. Department heads are involved in the budget-setting process to give them greater understanding of their finances.

## **Staff are extremely productive and have impressive rates for fire safety audits and fire safety home visits**

We are impressed with the service's productivity rates. It doesn't have large prevention or protection teams and a large proportion of activities is completed by the operational workforce. We are pleased to see that the service's arrangements for managing performance clearly link resource use to the CRMP and service's strategic priorities. As of 31 March 2021, the service completed:

- 6.1 fire safety audits per 100 known premises (England rate is 1.7); and
- 7.6 home fire safety visits per 1,000 population (England rate is 4.5).

We also found that all SSRI records (over 1,000) were in date. In addition, all the training records we sampled were in date.

Most staff that we spoke to were aware of their targets for prevention, protection and response activities.

The service has considered the contribution it will make towards the national productivity target (using an extra 3 percent of national [wholetime firefighter](#) capacity to carry out additional prevention and protection work). At the time of the inspection, the service has set up a project to review where it could enhance productivity further and assess how the service can contribute to the national target.

### **New ways of working have been introduced**

The service is implementing new ways of working. For example, since our previous inspection, the service has removed a layer of management resulting in [watch](#) managers having more authority and responsibility to manage their own teams rather than be directed by others. Watch managers told us this is a positive step that helps them to directly manage day and night activities to make sure their teams are productive.

We were pleased to see that when firefighters are called to a different area to cover crews attending an emergency, they can access and complete home fire safety visits, regardless of their location. This makes sure staff are productive.

The service had to adapt its working practices because of the pandemic, and these are still part of its day-to-day activity. They include corporate staff having the option of hybrid working, which allows them to work flexibly.

## **The service has improved the way it monitors and evaluates its collaboration with other organisations**

We are pleased to see the service meets its statutory duty to collaborate, and routinely considers opportunities to collaborate with other emergency responders. Collaborative work is aligned to the priorities in the service's CRMP. For example:

- several properties are used by other emergency services including a quad emergency service station housing fire, police, ambulance and mountain rescue units;
- there are formal arrangements with other fire and rescue services, including the use of incident command support units and sharing of a data protection officer and [occupational health services](#) with Cleveland Fire Brigade; and
- two community safety responder posts have been established, which combine the roles of an [on-call firefighter](#), a police community support officer and a first responder.

In our previous inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should ensure that it is reviewing, monitoring and evaluating all collaborative work. We are encouraged to see the improvements the service has made. For example, it has evaluated its estates and details the financial benefits the service has received. The evaluation also includes the benefits of sharing information locally on arson risks.

## **The service has effective business continuity arrangements**

An area for improvement we raised in our last inspection was that the service should ensure it has good business continuity arrangements that take account of all foreseeable threats and risks. We are encouraged to see the improvements the service has made.

The service has appointed a new business continuity officer and there are good arrangements in place for areas where threats and risks are considered high. These are regularly reviewed and tested so that staff are aware of the arrangements and their associated responsibilities. For example, the power supply in a fire station and its local area was disrupted for four days during Storm Arwen, but business continuity plans were successfully executed.

Business continuity arrangements to support the service during significant events that may cause a staffing shortage were activated during the pandemic when there was a rise in COVID-19 cases.

Operational cover contracts address staff shortages by offering staff the opportunity to undertake additional work over their contracted hours. They are also used to support community events and specialist training. Staff are paid their standard hourly rate plus 10 percent. This efficient use of resources has resulted in the service's use of overtime being lower than the England rate.

## **The service continually reviews its costs and makes regular savings without affecting its service to the public**

There are regular reviews to consider all the service's expenditure, including its non-pay costs. And this scrutiny makes sure the service gets value for money. For example, the service's incident command support unit needed to be replaced at an estimated cost of £500,000. After a review, the service opted to have a formal arrangement with other services to use their incident command support unit when required. We are pleased that the service continually reviews its non-pay costs and ensures value for money without affecting its operational performance and the service it provides to the public.

The service's successful apprenticeship programme has been in place since 2017. The service anticipates saving £1m on overall training costs over the next 5 years by using the programme effectively and the apprenticeship levy to its full potential.

The service is taking steps to make sure important areas, including estates, fleet, and procurement, are well placed to achieve efficiency gains through sound financial management and best working practices. The service uses the county council's contracts for day-to-day purchasing and uses the national procurement contracts to achieve greater efficiencies.

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



### **Good (2019: Good)**

County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service is good at making the service affordable now and in the future.

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

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

## **The service has a good understanding of future financial challenges**

The service has a sound understanding of future financial challenges. It plans to mitigate its main or significant financial risks. At the time of our inspection, the service was closely monitoring the dispute over the current pay offer and had plans in place for any increases beyond what is forecasted in the medium-term financial plan. The service anticipates a budget shortfall of approximately £1m from 2023/24 onwards, but it has identified savings that can be made to address this deficit.

The underpinning assumptions are relatively robust, realistic, and prudent, and take account of the wider external environment and some scenario planning for future spending reductions. This includes putting control measures in place due to rising costs, particularly for fuel and energy.

We are pleased to see that the service has identified savings and investment opportunities to improve the service to the public or generate further savings. Following our last inspection, the service has restructured its leadership team, which resulted in savings of £250,000.

## **The service uses its reserves well**

The service has a sensible and sustainable plan for using its [reserves](#). This plan includes the use of reserves for the modernisation of its estates and other projects. There is a reserve to meet any unforeseen pension costs due to changes to pension schemes, or any increase in the number of ill-health retirements.

## **Fleet and estates are aligned to the community risk management plan**

The service's estate and fleet strategies have clear links to the CRMP. The service has historically invested in its estate and fleet. We were told that 50 percent of the estate was built less than 10 years ago. We visited many fire stations and found they were in good condition and there were appropriate facilities for staff. Both the fleet and estate strategies exploit opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness. For example, the service is reviewing whether to continue leasing some sites and whether it provides value for money.

The strategies are regularly reviewed so the service can properly assess the impact any changes in estate and fleet provision or future innovation have on risk.

## **Transformation is well managed and the service invests in technology**

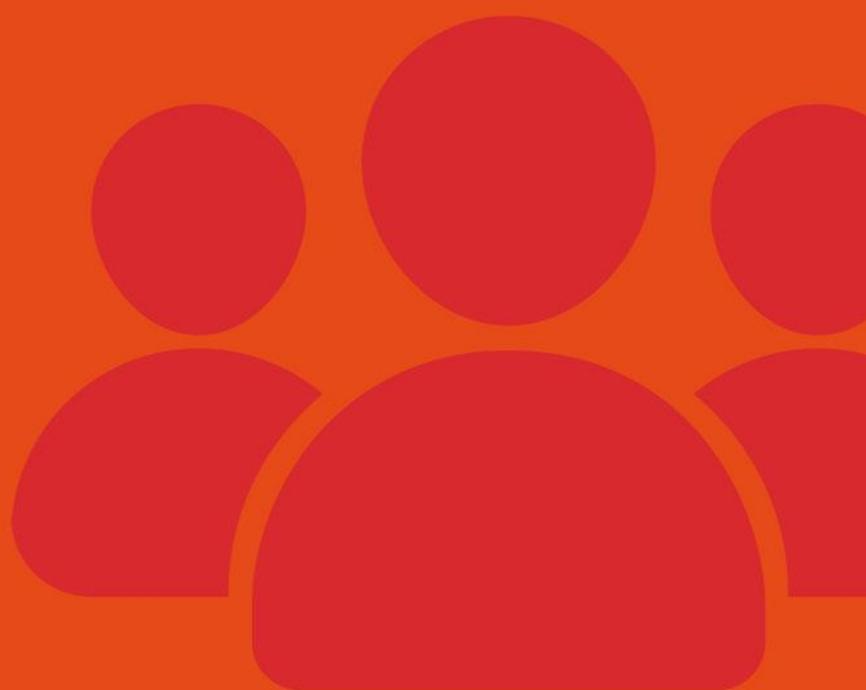
The service actively considers how changes in technology and future innovation may affect risk. The service has introduced iPads, which assist staff in completing risk information records and home fire safety visits. It also seeks to exploit opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness presented by changes in technology. For example, the service has purchased new [mobile data terminals](#), which were due to be installed shortly after our inspection.

The service has put in place the capacity and capability needed to achieve sustainable transformation, and it routinely seeks opportunities to work with others to improve efficiency and provide better services in the future. The service has recruited a project manager who manages the change programme. We were told it is one of the first emergency services to connect the [Emergency Services Network](#) on some of its fire engines.

### **The service regularly generates extra income**

The service actively considers and exploits opportunities for generating extra income. Its estates, which are shared with partner organisations, generate additional income. Other work, such as providing fleet maintenance to other fire and rescue services and the charging process for automatic fire alarms, recovers costs. Where appropriate, it has generated income to invest in improvements to the service provided to the public. This includes having a trading arm, [Vital Fire Solutions](#). The service has established clear roles and responsibilities for the board of directors and has controls to safeguard against conflicts of interest. This allows better scrutiny of the company. The performance of Vital Fire Solutions is subject to annual reviews. We were pleased that despite the challenges of the pandemic, in 2021/22 the authority received £100,000 income from the company.

# People



# How well does the service look after its people?



**Good**

## Summary

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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 (EDI) is part of everything the service does and its staff understand their role in promoting it. Overall, County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service is good at looking after its people.

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We are pleased with the progress the service has made since our last inspection in how it looks after its people, which has improved.

The service continues to have well-defined values that are understood by staff. It has developed several ways to engage with staff on issues and decisions that affect them. The chief fire officer had visited every [watch](#) this year and we were told by most operational staff that they received feedback on issues raised.

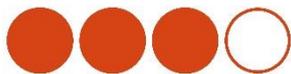
The service continues to have well-understood and effective well-being policies in place that are available to staff, including trauma support volunteers and access to [occupational health](#) and counselling services. Health and safety is managed well. We have identified an innovative practice, with the service developing a new breathing apparatus washing facility which removes the products of combustion from the breathing apparatus equipment. This further supports the aim of keeping operational staff safe.

The approach to workforce planning has improved. The strategic workforce plan sets out the service's main objectives, including making sure the right people, with the right skills and values, are in the right roles. This makes sure skills and capabilities align with what is needed to effectively deliver the CRMP.

The service has an effective and successful apprenticeship programme. The apprentices have been recruited in diverse roles across the service including operational roles, [fire control](#) and in workshops. We were told that recruiting apprentices has helped positively change the culture of the organisation. In the last cohort of firefighter apprentices, 50 percent were women and 25 percent from an ethnic minority background. We have identified the service's apprenticeship programme as an innovative practice.

We were encouraged to find the promotion process was managed well. Many staff told us it is transparent and they knew what is expected of them to progress in their roles.

## Promoting the right values and culture



### Good (2019: Good)

County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service is good at promoting the right values and culture.

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

#### **Innovative practice: A new breathing apparatus washing facility has been created**

A new breathing apparatus washing facility has been created in the service's training centre. The facility removes the products of combustion from the breathing apparatus equipment and is used alongside additional cleaning of firefighting personal protective equipment. This further supports the aim of keeping operational staff safe.

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

## **Values are established, and culture continues to improve**

The service continues to have well-defined values that are understood by staff. Of those who responded to our staff survey, 96 percent (82 out of 85) said they are aware of the service values. Behaviours that reflect service values are shown at all levels of the service. This was reflected in our staff survey, where 98 percent (80 out of 82) of respondents stated that service values are constantly modelled and maintained by their colleagues, and 88 percent (72 out of 82) stating that line managers modelled and maintained the values. We spoke to many staff who are proud to work for the service.

The service has introduced the new national [Core Code of Ethics](#) and aligned it to its own values and behaviours. Any gaps were identified, training has been provided to staff and a new booklet was published.

Senior leaders act as role models. Most staff we spoke to said senior leaders were more visible since our last inspection and there has been an improvement in the willingness to listen to any issues raised.

## **Well-being support for staff is good**

The service continues to have well understood and effective well-being policies in place that are available to staff. A significant range of well-being support is available to support both physical and mental health. This includes:

- trauma support volunteers;
- mental health first aiders; and
- occupational health and specialist counselling services.

There are good provisions in place to promote staff well-being. We spoke to many staff who were positive about the well-being support. The overwhelming majority of respondents to our survey, 93 percent (79 out of 85), told us they feel able to access services to support their mental well-being. Additionally, 87 percent of respondents (74 out of 85) were confident that well-being support would be offered after an incident if appropriate.

## **Health and safety is now well managed**

In our previous inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should ensure that required actions arising from health and safety investigations happen on time and any identified learning is implemented. Encouragingly, in this inspection we found the service has reviewed all health and safety investigations and made sure all actions have been implemented. A quality assurance process has been developed and a quarterly health and safety meeting takes place. The service also invests in accredited health and safety training that managers must complete.

The service has effective and well understood health and safety policies and procedures in place. These policies and procedures are readily available and effectively promoted to all staff. Our staff survey shows that 93 percent of respondents (79 out of 85) feel their personal safety and welfare is treated seriously at work.

The service monitors staff who have secondary employment or dual contracts to make sure they comply with the secondary employment policy and don't work excessive hours. Most staff we spoke to were able to clearly explain the rest periods that they would adhere to.

A new breathing apparatus washing facility has been created in its training centre. The facility removes the products of combustion from the breathing apparatus equipment and is used alongside additional cleaning of firefighting personal protective equipment. This helps keep firefighters safe.

### **There are clear processes in place for managing absence**

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

We found there are clear processes in place to manage absences for all staff. There is clear guidance for managers, who are confident in the process. Absences are managed well and in accordance with policy. We spoke to managers who told us a return-to-work welfare discussion takes place and absences and trends are monitored by the service leadership team. The service has also introduced HR specialists who are assigned to each fire station to provide additional support to staff. Overall, the service told us it has seen a significant increase in staff absences over the 12 months up to 31 March 2022.

### **Getting the right people with the right skills**



#### **Good (2019: Good)**

County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service is good at getting the right people with the right skills.

Fire and rescue services should have a workforce plan in place that is linked to their [integrated risk management plans \(IRMPs\)](#), 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.

### **Innovative practice: There is an effective apprenticeship programme**

The service has an effective and successful apprenticeship programme which was implemented in 2017. The apprentices have been recruited in diverse roles across the service. This has helped positively change the organisation's culture. In the last cohort, 50 percent were women and 25 percent from an ethnic minority background.

The service anticipates saving £1m on overall training costs over the next 5 years by using the programme effectively and the apprenticeship levy to its full potential.

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

### **Workforce planning has improved since our last inspection**

We identified as an area for improvement in our last inspection that the service should ensure the effectiveness of its workforce planning so it can meet operational and organisational needs. We were pleased to find the service now has good workforce planning in place. The strategic workforce plan sets out the main objectives, including among other things, making sure the right people with the right skills and values are in the right roles. This makes sure skills and capabilities align with what is needed to effectively deliver the CRMP.

Workforce planning is subject to regular scrutiny in the form of regular meetings to discuss requirements. Managers review their staffing plans, which allows the service to address any issues in a timely manner. For example, three fire safety inspectors left the service unexpectedly, but workforce planning identified people in the service who had the appropriate qualifications to step into some of the roles.

Most staff told us that they could access the training they need to be effective in their role. The service's training plans make sure they can maintain competence and capability effectively.

The service monitors staff competence by a central system. It regularly updates its understanding of staff's skills and risk-critical safety capabilities through this system. For example, the service's competency records are easily accessible to operational staff, which allows them to make sure their competencies are up to date. This is also monitored at a strategic level. This approach means the service can identify gaps in workforce capabilities and resilience and can make sound and financially sustainable decisions about current and future needs.

## **Learning and improvement is well established with a range of resources in place for all staff**

A culture of continuous improvements is promoted throughout the service and staff are encouraged to learn and develop. Most staff that we spoke to, including corporate staff, were satisfied with the learning and development available to them. We were told that internal and external training courses were available, and staff spoke positively about the leadership courses they had attended. We were also told that the central system that holds the various training packages has improved since our last inspection.

We are pleased to see that the service has a range of resources in place. These include online learning resources. All departments covering prevention and protection have continuous professional development in place.

## **The service uses its apprenticeship programme effectively**

The service has an effective and successful apprenticeship programme which was implemented in 2017. The apprentices have been recruited in diverse roles across the service including operational roles, fire control and in workshops. Apprentices are proud to work for the service and praised the support they had been given.

We found that once an apprentice joins the service, they spend time in various roles across the service. For example, an apprentice firefighter spends several weeks in the specialist prevention and protection teams, which allows them to learn more about these roles. This also supports their training and competence. All apprentices are invested in and complete various qualifications, such as the Level 3 Certificate in Fire Safety.

## **Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity**



### **Good (2019: Requires improvement)**

County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service is good at ensuring fairness and promoting diversity.

Creating a more representative workforce will provide huge benefits for fire and rescue services. This includes greater access to talent and different ways of thinking, and improved understanding of and engagement with their local communities. Each service should make sure that EDI is 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.

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 improved its channels for staff feedback and engages well with its workforce**

In our previous inspection, we said the service should assure itself that staff are confident in using its feedback systems. This was an area for improvement. Since then, the service has developed several ways to engage with staff on issues and decisions that affect them. There are regular communications sent to staff. The chief fire officer had visited every watch this year, with the deputy chief fire officer visiting other functions across the service. We were told by most operational staff that the chief fire officer provided feedback on any issues raised. There are other platforms in place to provide feedback, such as the intranet webpage. However, 36 percent (31 out of 85) of respondents to our staff survey said they didn't feel confident in the systems to provide feedback at all levels in the service.

There are methods to build awareness of fairness and diversity among all staff, as well as work to identify matters that affect different staff groups. For example, the service has an EDI working group chaired by a senior leader. One of the group's recommendations was that the facilities in a fire station needed to be improved to make it more inclusive. Work to address this is currently underway.

### **Staff were clear about how to tackle bullying, harassment and discrimination**

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

In this inspection, 6 percent of staff (5 out of 85) who responded to our staff survey told us they had been subject to bullying or harassment and 12 percent (10 out of 85) to discrimination over the past 12 months.

In our last inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should assure itself that it has effective grievance procedures that staff are confident using. The service has made improvements in this area, such as recording all formal and informal concerns and providing additional training to staff. However, we spoke to some staff who still didn't feel comfortable in raising workforce concerns more formally.

Most staff are confident in the service's approach to tackling bullying, harassment and discrimination and disciplinary matters. The service has made sure all staff are trained and clear about what to do if they encounter inappropriate behaviour and we were pleased to find that staff felt confident to do so.

## **The service is improving the diversity of its workforce**

There is an open, fair and honest recruitment process for staff or those wishing to work for the fire and rescue service. The service has an effective system to understand and remove the risk of disproportionality in recruitment processes. For example, the service found that some applicants weren't passing some of the practical tests in the recruitment process. The service offered the applicants further support over several weeks to increase their chances of passing.

The service has put considerable effort into developing its recruitment processes so that they are fair and understood by potential applicants. This includes the use of social media. The recruitment policies are comprehensive and cover opportunities in all roles. Recruitment opportunities are advertised both internally and externally, which has encouraged applicants from diverse backgrounds. The service has recruited external applicants into strategic and middle manager positions.

The service has made improvements in increasing staff diversity at all levels of the organisation. In its last cohort of firefighter apprentices, 50 percent were female and 25 percent were from a minority ethnic background. Of the whole workforce, 1.6 percent are from an ethnic minority background (local population is 2.2 percent) and 16.2 percent are women.

Positive action initiatives include taster days and fitness sessions for people interested in joining the service. In our last inspection we identified that the service should improve understanding of positive action among staff as an area for improvement. We are pleased with the progress made. The service has provided training and created an awareness video. We spoke to many staff who had a good understanding of positive action and supported the service's initiatives. EDI training is completed by all staff and managers complete an enhanced course.

## **The service's approach to equality, diversity and inclusion has improved**

The service has improved its approach to EDI and is making sure it can offer the right services to its communities and support staff with [protected characteristics](#). We found reasonable adjustments were made for applicants going through the recruitment process and for those undertaking training activities. We spoke to many staff who were proud to support the Pride event they were due to attend.

The service has a process in place to carry out equality impact assessments. The ones we reviewed had been completed to a good standard and involved engagement with internal staff and external organisations. However, more could be done to improve [organisational learning](#), as we found that the information and findings in the impact assessments that may affect staff with protected characteristics weren't shared across the service.

## Managing performance and developing leaders



### **Good (2019: Requires improvement)**

County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service is good 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.

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

### **The appraisal system is effective**

There is a good performance management system in place which allows the service to effectively develop and assess the individual performance of all staff. Following our last inspection, the service has redesigned its appraisal system. All staff are required to complete an annual appraisal and a mid-year review. The appropriate support was provided via Microsoft Teams and there are training packages available to staff. We spoke to many staff who feel the process has been simplified and the appraisal is effective.

Through our staff survey, most staff reported that they have regular discussions with their manager and that they were meaningful. Each staff member has individual goals and objectives, and regular assessments of performance. Staff feel confident in the performance and development arrangements that are in place.

### **The selection, development and promotion of staff is open, accessible and fair**

The service has put considerable effort into developing its promotion and progression processes so that they are fair and understood by staff. This was an area for improvement we identified in our last inspection. During our inspection, we reviewed a range of promotion files. We were encouraged to find these were well-managed. We spoke to many staff who told us the promotion process is transparent and they knew what is expected of them to progress in their roles. Those who were successful also spoke positively about being given their final score, which allows them to manage their own expectations on how soon they are to be promoted.

The service recognises that the promotion process could be further improved. We spoke to staff who didn't understand why the initial application form and assessment development centre's scores, which include an interview and presentation, don't count towards the final stage of the promotion process.

The service has effective succession planning processes in place that allow it to effectively manage the career pathways of its staff, including roles requiring specialist skills. Selection processes are managed consistently by the HR team. Temporary promotions are used appropriately to fill short-term resourcing gaps. But we found some temporary promotions had been in place for a long time. The service should make sure it effectively manages their duration.

### **The service is good at developing leaders**

In our previous inspection, we identified that the service should put in place an open and fair process to identify, develop and support high-potential staff and aspiring leaders. We are pleased that the service has addressed this area for improvement.

The service has effective succession planning processes in place that allow it to manage high-potential staff into leadership roles. This is initially discussed during the appraisal and monitored in the promotion process where successful applicants are matched to the vacancies available. The service has several leadership programmes in place including a Chartered Management Institute leadership course. There are talent management schemes to develop specific staff. High-potential staff are given bespoke development programmes to complete, which supports them in the promotion process.

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