

Fire & Rescue Service 2021/22

Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of West Midlands Fire Service



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About this inspection

This inspection is from our third round of inspections of fire and rescue services in England. We first inspected West Midlands Fire Service in January 2019. We published a report with our findings in June 2019 on the service's effectiveness and efficiency and how it looks after its people. Our second inspection, in autumn 2020, considered how the service was responding to the pandemic. This inspection considers for a second time the service's effectiveness, efficiency and people.

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

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

This report sets out our inspection findings for West Midlands Fire 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.


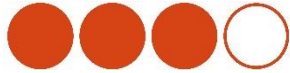

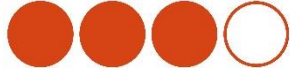
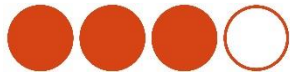
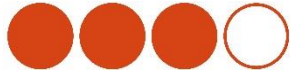
If we find shortcomings in the service, we will judge it as requires improvement.

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
 Effectiveness	 Outstanding	Good
Understanding fires and other risks	 Outstanding	Good
Preventing fires and other risks	 Good	Good
Protecting the public through fire regulation	 Good	Good
Responding to fires and other emergencies	 Outstanding	Outstanding
Responding to major and multi-agency incidents	 Good	Good

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

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

HM Inspector's summary

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

I congratulate West Midlands Fire Service on its first-rate performance in keeping people safe and secure from fires and other risks.

The service has made excellent progress in many areas since our 2019 inspection and is more effective in every area. It has addressed areas for improvement to ensure it looks after its people better. And it continues to make sure that it uses its resources well and provides value for money.

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

- It is outstanding in how it understands the risk of fire and other emergencies. This means that it knows how and where fires are most likely to happen so it can target its activity to mitigate those risks.
- It continues to be outstanding in the way it responds to fires and other emergencies. It makes sure that it has resources in the right place so it can respond to emergencies in the fastest possible time. This helps to keep the public safe and save lives.
- It has improved how it looks after its people. I was pleased to see the service communicates better with its staff and looks after their health, safety and well-being. Staff are beginning to see the benefit of its work to improve the culture of the organisation. Well-looked after staff can be more effective and efficient in how they work to keep the public safe. I look forward to seeing the continued improvements that the service makes in this area.

There are many positive findings from this inspection, and we found that all areas for improvements identified in our last inspection have been addressed. But the service can still make further improvements, such as in the way it assures itself of the competence of its workforce. And it should continue the good work it has done so far to make sure that its values are demonstrated at all levels of the organisation. Overall, however, I commend the performance of West Midlands Fire Service. I am sure the service will be committed to improving yet further.



Wendy Williams

HM Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Service in numbers



Response

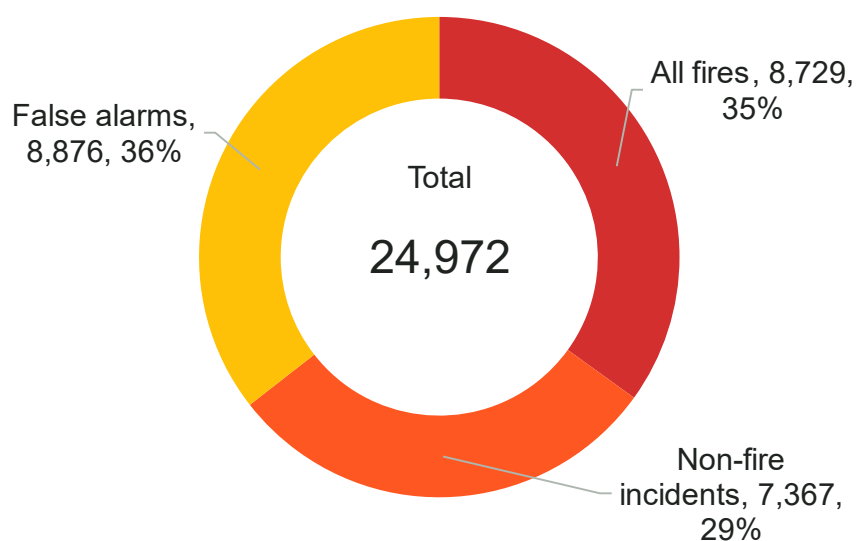
	West Midlands	England
Incidents attended per 1,000 population Year ending 30 September 2021	8.49	9.50
Home fire safety checks carried out by fire and rescue service per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2021	6.27	4.47
Fire safety audits per 100 known premises Year ending 31 March 2021	0.25	1.70
Average availability of pumps Year ending 31 March 2021	88.4%	86.4%



Cost

Firefighter cost per person Year ending 31 March 2021	£24.46	£25.02
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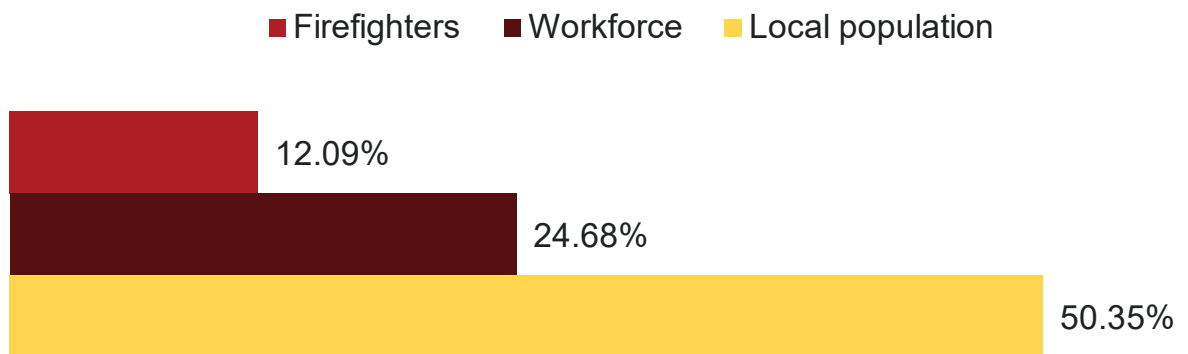
Incidents attended in the year to 30 September 2021



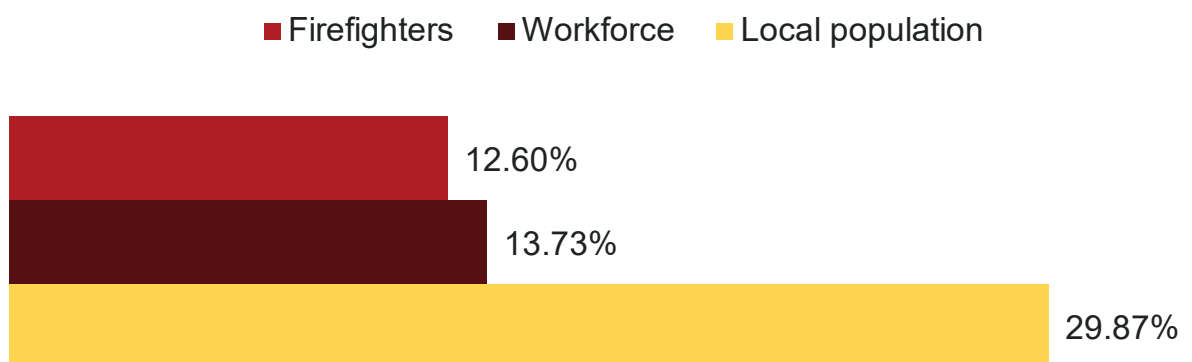


Five-year change in total workforce 2016 to 2021	-7.16%	-1.60%
Number of firefighters per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2021	0.48	0.62
Percentage of firefighters who are wholetime Year ending 31 March 2021	99.4%	64.4%

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?



Outstanding

Summary

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

We are pleased to see that the service continues to improve across all areas of effectiveness.

We were particularly impressed with how the service uses a wide range of data and information to understand the risk of fire and other emergencies. And it continues to make sure that it can respond to incidents in the fastest possible time by using its resources in the most effective and efficient way.

The service continues to make sure that its prevention activity is targeted at those who are most at risk from a fire. We were impressed with the way the service evaluates the impact of its activity to make people safer.

Since our last inspection in 2019 the service has made sure it has enough resources to deliver its risk-based inspection programme (RBIP). We are pleased to see that the service can effectively meet all its responsibilities to protect people by making sure buildings are safe.

And we found that the service is well prepared to respond to major and multi-agency incidents and has addressed the areas for improvement that were identified in our last inspection in 2019.

Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies



Outstanding (2019: Good)

West Midlands Fire Service is outstanding 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.

Innovative practice: The service used a community messaging platform to consult on its risk management plan

The pandemic prevented West Midlands Fire Service from carrying out its community risk management plan consultation in person. Instead it used West Midlands Now, a free community messaging platform with 80,000 subscribers, along with other digital and social media platforms. Of the 11,000 responses it received, 88 percent came from West Midlands Now. This meant the service could reach many sections of the community, including diverse and underrepresented groups. As a result, the service can be more confident that the risks and priorities set out in its community risk management plan reflect the issues that matter to the community.

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

The service uses a comprehensive range of data and information sources and carries out a thorough analysis of these to identify risk

We found the service to be highly effective in how it understands and analyses risk. The service has assessed an appropriate range of risks and threats after a thorough [integrated risk management planning](#) process. When assessing risk, it has considered relevant information collected from a broad range of internal and external sources and data sets. This includes Office for National Statistics and census data and national, international, and global risk registers. The service also uses information to help it to understand the risks in premises, such as Care Quality Commission ratings from the healthcare sector, building heritage status, food hygiene scores, the number of fire alarm activations, and whether the building has a sprinkler system.

The service uses several sophisticated tools to analyse the data and information together with incident data. This helps it to identify risks and target its activity to mitigate those risks. For example, it has identified an increase in people in its

community living in poverty, which in turn leads to health inequalities and makes people more [vulnerable](#) to the risk of fire. So, it is working with health and social care partners to reduce health inequalities.

We noted that in the [National Fire Chiefs Council \(NFCC\)](#), the service leads on assessing community risk and vulnerability to improve the safety, health and well-being of communities.

The service is innovative in the way it consults communities to set its community risk management plan

As part of the process to set its integrated risk management plan, which the service calls its community risk management plan (CRMP), the service has consulted and undertaken constructive dialogue with communities and organisations to both understand risks and explain how it intends to mitigate them. For example, the building risk review team has worked with housing associations and business owners in response to emerging risks associated with flammable cladding. The service is part of several local and regional [safety advisory groups](#) and chairs the West Midlands Social Housing Group, which is attended by all seven local authorities in the area. The service is also part of the West Midlands Race Equality Taskforce, which aims to improve equality of opportunity for all communities.

Because of the pandemic, the service mainly carried out its CRMP consultation digitally. We saw how it made very effective use of a free community messaging platform with 80,000 subscribers. This accounted for 88 percent of all responses to the consultation and meant that the service could gather the views of many sections of the community, including those who have previously been harder to reach. The service also made its consultation document available in different versions, such as easy-read and audible, as well as different languages to make sure it was accessible to everyone.

The service received around 11,000 responses overall, which is almost double the response to its previous consultation. A good level of response means that the service can better understand the issues that are important to the community and make sure that its plans and priorities reflect them.

The community risk management plan clearly sets out how the service will use its prevention, protection and response activity to reduce risks

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 effectively resourced to mitigate or reduce the risks and threats the community faces, both now and in the future.

For example, it has identified that there is a growing number of small businesses that are less likely to have well established fire safety procedures. So, it is targeting fire safety visits, known as safe and strong visits, to those businesses.

The service has targeted its fire safety audits at care homes because during the pandemic it couldn't visit them. And it had identified risks associated with the forthcoming Commonwealth Games, so it had prioritised inspecting hotels.

It has also identified other important risks from regeneration and development projects, such as the HS2 high-speed rail project.

The service gathers, maintains and shares a good range of 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. For example, there is a dedicated team to assess the risks associated with the Commonwealth Games. The team is linked to the [local resilience forum \(LRF\)](#) to make sure that the information is shared with other agencies. The service also visits all high-rise buildings in its area to gather information about risks.

It has a good process to quality assure operational risk information with station managers reviewing all very high and high-risk premises. This information is readily available for the service's prevention, protection and response staff, which enables them to identify, reduce and mitigate risk effectively. For example, risk information is sent automatically to the [control room](#) so staff there can update the [mobilising](#) system, and to response crews and protection staff. Firefighters could demonstrate how they can easily access risk information.

Because firefighters carry out prevention and protection activity in addition to responding to incidents, risk information is shared well across the three functions. This is further helped by fire safety officers and prevention staff based at stations working closely with response crews. Where appropriate, risk information is passed on to other organisations such as the LRF and local authorities.

During the inspection we found some risk visits were overdue. We noted that the service took immediate action to address this. The service should also make sure that all buildings have the correct risk level assigned to them.

The service uses learning from operational activity to build its understanding of risk

The service records and communicates risk information effectively. It also routinely updates risk assessments and uses feedback from local and national operational activity to inform its planning assumptions. For example, it uses national learning from significant incidents together with local incident data trends and risk mapping. This led to the decision to enhance the technical rescue capability at Sutton Coldfield fire station, which was identified as the best location to mitigate the identified risk.

The service has taken action to address the recommendations from 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.

West Midlands Fire Service has responded positively and proactively to learning from this tragedy. The service identified that there were 707 high-rise buildings in the service area. It has visited all buildings, often with local councils, which meant that minor works could be quickly carried out. It also works well with housing associations and business owners.

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 and all high-rise buildings that have cladding similar to the cladding installed on Grenfell Tower.

Preventing fires and other risks



Good (2019: Good)

West Midlands Fire 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.

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

The service's prevention strategy is targeted at those people who are most at risk from fire

The service has an effective prevention strategy that is clearly linked to the risks identified in its CRMP. The service reviews and analyses incident data to identify those people that are most at risk from accidental fires in the home. It routinely carries out serious incident reviews so it can learn from fires that have resulted in a death or serious injury.

The service has identified that there is a direct link between health inequalities and the risk of being injured or killed in a fire. So, it is working proactively with partner organisations to reduce the health inequalities that people face. An example of this is

the service's participation in integrated care systems, a partnership between the NHS, local authorities and social care that aims to make sure services are co-ordinated to improve the population's health.

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, operational station-based staff carry out [safe and well visits](#) to homes in addition to safe and strong visits to businesses. There are also complex needs officers and fire safety officers based at stations who have a higher level of training and deal with more complex cases. This means that the activities of prevention, protection and response are well co-ordinated. Safe and well visits are often carried out jointly with partners such as social care. And the service carried out safe and well visits at the same time as reviewing the risks in all its high-rise buildings.

Staff gave good examples of how they build relationships with local community groups including food banks, church groups and mental health drop-in centres to make sure they can support those people who are most vulnerable.

The effect of the pandemic on prevention

We considered how the service had adapted its prevention work during our COVID-19 specific inspection in September 2020. At that time, we found it had adapted its public prevention work appropriately. Since then, we are encouraged to find that the service has resumed carrying out face-to-face safe and well visits and has increased the overall number of visits from 18,422 in 2020/21 to 36,997 in 2021/22.

The service is good at targeting prevention activity at people most at risk

Prevention activity is clearly prioritised using a risk-based approach towards people most at risk from fire and other emergencies. The service has found that this is most effectively done by working closely with organisations already in contact with people who are vulnerable and most at risk of fire. It works well with organisations to make sure that they understand the link between vulnerability and the risk of fire.

As a result, the service gets referrals for safe and well visits from thousands of organisations. This ranges from large organisations such as Western Power and Birmingham City Council to small charities and voluntary groups. The service has a system for scoring referrals so that it can prioritise those that are the highest risk. These are then passed to stations for operational crews to carry out the safe and well check.

Stations have targets for completing safe and well checks, but we found they could be better directed towards specific risks.

In the year ending 31 March 2021, the service carried out 6.3 safe and well visits per 1,000 of the population, which is well above the rate for England of 2.8 visits per 1,000 of the population. At the time of our inspection, the service had around 3,700 safe and well visits waiting to be allocated. We were assured that in each case at least one attempt has been made to contact the individual.

The service makes sure that its safe and well checks are accessible to everyone. There is comprehensive information about the checks on its website for individuals, their carers and professionals, including a learning portal. It can translate information into many different languages and the website includes screen reading software and videos with sign language.

Staff are competent in providing safe and well checks

Staff told us they have the right skills and confidence to make safe and well visits. These checks cover an appropriate range of hazards that can put vulnerable people at greater risk from fire and other emergencies. Operational staff carry out safe and well checks. When there are additional vulnerabilities identified, or the case is more complex, they can refer these to a complex needs officer who has a greater level of training. There are also staff trained in British Sign Language.

Staff can respond well to safeguarding concerns

Staff we interviewed told us about occasions when they had identified [safeguarding](#) problems. They told us they feel confident and trained to act appropriately and promptly. Staff complete a mandatory safeguarding awareness training package. There is also a safeguarding toolkit on the service's intranet site. Complex needs officers and station commanders provide more support to staff when needed. The service also has a representative on each of the seven local authority safeguarding boards in its area and is working with them to make the referral process more efficient.

The service collaborates well with other organisations

The service works with a wide range of other organisations, such as local authorities and other emergency services, to prevent fires and other emergencies.

We found good evidence that it routinely refers people at greatest risk to organisations that may be better able to meet their needs. The service has well established arrangements in place to receive referrals from a wide range of other organisations, including the ambulance service, oxygen suppliers and telecare providers. The service has developed many referral partnerships, such as with local playgroups, which some of the most vulnerable people attend. And it acts appropriately on the referrals it receives by assessing the risk and prioritising them.

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. For example, the service has effective

arrangements in place to share information with other organisations on serious incident reviews carried out after there has been a serious injury or fatality from a fire. This means that the service, together with other organisations, can identify policies and practices that need to be changed or improved to reduce the likelihood of such incidents reoccurring.

The service is good at tackling fire-setting behaviour

The service has a range of suitable and effective interventions to target and educate people of different ages who show signs of fire-setting behaviour. It has a learning centre, Safeside, which schoolchildren attend to learn about the dangers of fire and other risks. The service gets referrals from the police, schools and local authorities and operational staff work with people who show signs of fire-setting behaviour.

The number of deliberate fires in the service area has steadily declined over the last 10 years from nearly 10,000 in 2010/11 to nearly 3,000 in 2020/21 and is below the rate for England.

When appropriate, the service routinely shares information with other relevant organisations to support the prosecution of arsonists. The service investigates fires where the cause is deliberate and contributes to the coroner's court process in cases when there is a death or serious injury.

The service is good at evaluating its prevention work

We were impressed with the way the service evaluates prevention activity. The evaluation methods measure how effective its work is so that the service knows what works, and its communities get prevention activity that meets their needs.

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 and amend future activity, so it is focused on what the community needs and what works.

The service has given out items such as smoke alarms, hearing impaired alarms, fire retardant bedding and mailbox protectors, which it states have contributed to a 7.7 percent reduction in the number of casualties.

The service sent out a questionnaire to people who had received a safe and well visit and received over 1,400 responses in a 6-month period. This identified changes in behaviour that indicated that people were more likely to be safer. For example, of 101 referrals to smoking cessation services, 48 people said they had stopped smoking. A housing association now asks tenants who have received a safe and well visit to complete the questionnaire on behalf of the service. The service has been told by housing inspecting officers that of 33 responses to the survey, 7 people had stopped using chip pans.

Protecting the public through fire regulation



Good (2019: Good)

West Midlands Fire Service is good at protecting the public through fire regulation.

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

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

There is an effective protection strategy aligned to the community risk management plan

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

Staff across the service are involved in this activity, with information effectively exchanged information as needed. Fire safety staff are based at stations and operational staff carry out visits to commercial premises so identified risks are easily communicated between protection and response staff. 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. For example, if an inspecting officer identifies risks or hazards at a building, this instigates a site visit by the local crew. A risk critical notice, an urgent message sent to all operational staff, is immediately circulated.

The effect of the pandemic on protection

We considered how the service had adapted its protection activity during our COVID-19 specific inspection in September 2020. At that time, we found it had adapted its protection work well. Since then, we are encouraged to find that the service has resumed all on-site protection activity. The service has also communicated effectively with business owners, particularly those for whom English is their second language. It gave advice to businesses on how they can operate safely as they re-opened when the restrictions were lifted.

The service's protection activity is aligned to risk

The service's RBIP is focused on the service's highest risk buildings. It uses data from a wide range of sources to inform the programme, including previous incidents, building complexity and occupancy. It also includes information from other organisations, such as the Care Quality Commission for healthcare settings, and the Food Standards Agency for restaurants. It then categorises premises based on the hazards they present, which in turn informs how often they should be inspected. This information is held on a database that creates the inspection schedule.

The focus on the highest risk premises and complaints from the public means the service targets premises based on the risk identified within the RBIP. In the year 2020/21, it carried out 0.25 audits per 100 known premises compared to the England rate of 1.70 audits per 100 known premises. Based on this targeted approach to risk, it is identifying more unsatisfactory audits. In the year 2020/21, 59 percent of audits were unsatisfactory compared to the England rate of 25 percent. This means that the service is better at targeting its audit activity at the highest risks. However, the service should assure itself that it has visited all its highest risk premises.

The audits we reviewed were completed to a good standard and within the timescales the service has set itself.

The service has completed its audits of aluminium composite material clad buildings

Audits have been carried out at all high-rise buildings the service has identified as using cladding that is similar to the cladding installed on Grenfell Tower. Information gathered during these audits is made available to response teams and control operators, enabling them to respond more effectively in an emergency.

The service identified that there were 707 high-rise residential buildings in its area. All have been audited and inspected by a safety inspection officer in the last 18 months. This included external wall assessments. As a result, there are five waking [watches](#) in place and one building had an informal notice suggesting safety measures. All data has been submitted to the Home Office.

The quality of audits is good

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; where [enforcement action](#) had been taken; and at high-rise, high-risk buildings.

The audits we reviewed were completed to a high standard, in a consistent, systematic way, and in line with the service's policies. Relevant information from the audits is made available to operational teams and control room operators.

The service quality assures protection activity

Quality assurance of protection activity takes place in a proportionate way. The process is led by the team leaders in each command area. These leaders have fewer audits allocated to them so they can accompany inspecting staff on audits and quality assure them as they are taking place. We saw evidence of workplace assessments taking place in the files we reviewed.

The service has good evaluation tools in place 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 is good at taking enforcement action when appropriate

The service consistently uses its full range of enforcement powers, and when appropriate, prosecutes those who don't comply with fire safety regulations. We saw evidence that the service had taken enforcement action in response to referrals and complaints about failures to comply with fire safety regulations. This included a care home that had been referred to the service by health and social care regulator the Care Quality Commission.

In the year to 31 March 2021, the service issued:

- 1 alteration notice;
- 247 informal notifications;
- 3 enforcement notices; and
- 8 prohibition notices.

The service also prosecuted 2 businesses that failed to comply with fire safety regulations. It completed 51 prosecutions in the 5 years from 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2021.

The service has a well-resourced protection function

The service has enough qualified protection staff to meet the requirements of the service's RBIP. Since our last inspection in 2019, the service has recruited an additional 11 members of staff. Fire safety inspectors have a monthly audit target allocated to them. This target is adjusted for staff who have to maintain their operational competence and for the team leaders who carry out quality assurance. There is a team dedicated to legal case management for enforcement activity, which also supports neighbouring fire and rescue services.

The service has put in place measures to make sure it has enough qualified staff in a timely way. This includes reducing the time taken for staff to become competent, giving operational staff the opportunity to become qualified before they join the protection team and re-engaging qualified staff who have retired. The service also provides opportunities for staff to gain the fire engineering degree qualification.

All these measures mean that the service can provide the range of audit and enforcement activity needed, both now and in the future.

The service works well with others

The service works closely with other enforcement agencies to regulate fire safety and routinely exchanges risk information with them. The service worked with local authorities in its high-rise buildings risk review. This meant that minor defects could be identified and quickly repaired.

As part of our inspection, we spoke to some partner organisations, including the police and county council. They described a good working relationship with the service and gave examples of where they have worked together effectively to regulate fire safety.

The service meets its statutory duty to respond to building consultations

The service responds to almost all building consultations on time, so consistently meets its statutory responsibility to comment on fire safety arrangements at new and altered buildings. And the service now has a dedicated team that deals with complex consultations, such as those related to the high-speed rail project, the Commonwealth Games and high-rise buildings. This team shares information and carries out joint visits with operational staff.

The service works well with businesses

The service proactively engages with local businesses and other organisations to promote compliance with fire safety legislation. Firefighters carry out safe and strong visits to businesses that it has identified from incident data as being more likely to have a fire. Firefighters provide education and advice and can also determine where intervention from a fire safety inspector might be needed.

The service has approximately 18 [primary authority schemes](#) in place with a range of large organisations. They can access tailored advice on complying with fire safety legislation. Fire engineers act as a single point of contact for those schemes.

There is comprehensive information on the service's website on how businesses can comply with fire safety regulations, including carrying out fire risk assessments, and booking a safe and strong visit.

The service is working to reduce the burden from unwanted fire signals

An effective risk-based approach is in place to manage the number of unwanted fire signals. Around a quarter of the calls the service received in 2020/21 were unwanted fire signals. This is above the rate for England. But the service doesn't attend around two-thirds of these calls, which compares well to the national rate of 37 percent. This was reflected in the relatively low proportion of incidents attended that proved to be false alarms.

The service's CRMP has identified false alarms as a priority area, and it has put measures in place to address them, including control staff questioning callers and responding with dedicated support vehicles rather than full crews. Fire safety staff also attend so they can give immediate advice to businesses on managing false alarms. The service has also categorised the risk of premises to make sure that full crews only attend those that are higher risk. These measures mean that fire engines remain available to respond to a genuine incident. 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



Outstanding (2019: Outstanding)

West Midlands Fire Service is outstanding 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.

The service manages its resources so it consistently responds effectively to incidents

We found that the service continues to be highly effective in the way that it manages its resources and capabilities. It consistently responds to incidents in the most effective way to keep the public safe.

The service's response strategy is linked to the risks identified in its CRMP. 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.

The service uses a dynamic cover tool in its control room that helps it both to move resources according to changing risk and respond to incidents in the fastest time. The control room also uses a tool called 999eye, which enables the caller to send it footage of the incident. This helps the control room decide on the most appropriate resources to send.

The service carried out a detailed analysis to determine the best location for a new technical rescue unit that would only be available to respond to the highest-risk incidents. It identified that placing the unit at Sutton Coldfield station would significantly improve the spread of cover and it would be able to respond within 30 minutes to all key sites in accordance with the Home Office model for response.

The service consistently meets or better its response standards

There are no national response standards of performance for the public. But the service has set out its own response standards in its CRMP. It bases its response standards on academic research into the likelihood of a person surviving a fire depending on several different factors. It specifically considers the impact the time taken to respond to a fire has on a person's survival where they are unable to evacuate without help. The service is updating this piece of work to make sure that its response standards continue to be relevant to risk.

The service consistently meets or better its standards. It sets a response standard of five minutes for the highest-risk calls. In the year to 31 March 2022 it achieved an average time of 4 minutes 42 seconds. It also bettered its response times for all other categories in that year. Home Office data shows that in the year to 31 December 2021, the service's average response time to [primary fires](#) was 6 minutes and 32 seconds. This is the fastest of all services in predominantly urban areas in England.

The service makes sure it always sends the right resources to incidents

To support its response strategy, the service makes sure it uses resources in the most efficient and effective way.

After a successful pilot, it has introduced a system of risk-based crewing. Previously it had a standard crew size that attended incidents, so it often had to move staff around stations to fill gaps. Now fire control and operational officers can make risk-based decisions about the right level of resources to mobilise to an incident. This will further improve how it responds because the service won't have to wait until a fire engine has a full crew to deploy it to a minor incident; it can send smaller vehicles with fewer staff.

In the year to 31 March 2021 the service's overall availability was 88.4 percent. The service mobilised to every incident.

The service commands incidents well

The service has trained incident commanders who are assessed regularly and properly. Incident commanders record their competence against national operational standards. They have a performance review of their command every two years, which takes place at an incident. This is reviewed by the line manager. There is a station peer assessment team that provides quality assurance on command competence. This enables the service to safely, assertively and effectively manage the whole range of incidents that it could face, from small and routine to complex multi-agency incidents.

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

Control staff are fully integrated in the service

We are pleased to see the service's control staff integrated into the service's command, training, exercise, debrief and assurance activity. The use of digital technology now makes it easier for control staff to be involved in debriefing because they don't need to leave the control room. The service has also simplified the process for completing a debrief form.

The service is good at handling fire survival guidance calls

The control room staff we interviewed are confident they can provide fire survival guidance to many callers simultaneously. This was identified as learning for fire services after the Grenfell Tower fire. Staff have been trained and there are clear systems in place for gathering and sharing information from callers.

Control has good systems in place to exchange real-time risk information with incident commanders, other responding organisations and supporting fire and rescue services. It has set up a dedicated communication channel to exchange information and a dedicated team in the control room is set up to manage the incident. Maintaining good situational awareness helps the service to communicate effectively with the public, providing them with accurate and tailored advice.

Risk information is easily accessible

We sampled a range of risk information including for neighbouring fire services that West Midlands would support during an incident. And we looked at what is in place for firefighters responding to incidents at high-risk, high-rise buildings and what information is held by fire control.

The information we reviewed was up to date and detailed. It could be easily accessed both by operational crews on the [mobile data terminals](#) on fire engines and by incident commanders and control staff. And staff told us they understood the information. Encouragingly, it had been completed with input from the service's prevention, protection and response teams when appropriate.

The service is very good at evaluating operational performance and national operational guidance

As part of the inspection, we reviewed a range of emergency incidents and training events. These include incidents at domestic and commercial premises and those where a person has been killed or seriously injured. We reviewed training events that had taken place with other organisations and other fire and rescue services.

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. For example, when crews identify a risk from an incident or a site visit, they inform the station commander who sends out an

immediate risk critical notice to all staff. This information is exchanged with other organisations where relevant.

We were impressed with the process the service has in place to learn from incidents to improve its service to the public. Staff spoke positively about the service's approach to sharing learning from incidents. They told us that they were encouraged to complete debrief forms so that the service can continually learn. For example, at a recent large incident the service identified learning for incident commanders to consider how electricity boxes can be bypassed by criminals growing cannabis.

The service has a dedicated team which collates and disseminates learning. We heard about how it works with others, for example the ambulance service, to make joint decisions at incidents.

We are encouraged to see the service is contributing to, and acting on, learning from other fire and rescue services or operational learning gathered from other emergency service partners. We heard of a recent exercise at Moor Street station where learning was identified about the time involved in dealing with an incident involving mass casualties. The service plans to make changes and test these out at another exercise with Staffordshire Fire and Rescue service.

The service is good at keeping the public informed

The service has good systems in place to inform the public about ongoing incidents and help keep them safe during and after incidents. This includes good use of social media about ongoing incidents and road closures. And it gives residents advice, for example about staying indoors and closing windows if there's a large amount of smoke in the area. The service also uses the community messaging platform that it used to consult on its CRMP to give information to the public about incidents, safety advice, news and events.

Responding to major and multi-agency incidents



Good (2019: Good)

West Midlands Fire 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 for major and multi-agency incidents

The service has effectively anticipated and considered the reasonably foreseeable risks and threats it may face. These risks are listed in both local and national risk registers as part of its CRMP. For example, the service has identified a risk from protest activity at the five oil refineries in the West Midlands area. Together with other emergency responders, the service has assessed risks, identified hazards and developed response plans. It has also identified the forthcoming Commonwealth Games as a major risk and has put in place a dedicated team to assess and work with other organisations to effectively manage this.

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. It shares its control room with Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service and both work to make sure that the nearest resources are mobilised regardless of the incident location. This helps to make sure the public get the quickest response. We are pleased to see that since our previous inspection in 2019, firefighters have access to risk information from neighbouring services.

The service can respond effectively to major and multi-agency incidents

We reviewed the arrangements the service has in place to respond to different major incidents, including a marauding terrorist attack, large events or incidents involving chemical, biological or radioactive materials.

We were impressed with the arrangements in place, which are well understood by staff. For example, control staff could confidently describe the action plans and communications systems they have in place for major incidents, including requesting national assets. The service has the third highest number of high-rise buildings in the country. It has completed a full audit on each building, working with local authorities and housing associations. As a result, it has detailed plans in place for each building, including full evacuation plans.

The service works well with other fire services

The service supports other fire and rescue services responding to emergency incidents. For example, it recently assisted Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service with a large high-rise incident. It is intraoperable with these services and can form part of a multi-agency response.

The service has successfully deployed to other services and has used national assets. It has a range of assets that it can deploy to assist other services. These include:

- a detection, investigation and monitoring team;
- support in the event of a chemical, biological or radioactive materials incident;
- a mass decontamination unit;
- a high-volume pump; and

- technical rescue units.

The service carries out exercises with neighbouring services

We are pleased to see that since our previous inspection in 2019, the service has a cross-border exercise plan with neighbouring fire and rescue services so 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 management and service plans.

Incident commanders understand how to work with other emergency responders at an incident

The incident commanders we interviewed have been trained in and were familiar with JESIP for working with other emergency responders at an incident.

The service could provide us with strong evidence that it consistently follows these principles. This includes ongoing training to ensure commanders' skills are up to date and is carried out with other emergency services. We saw a joint letter from the three emergency services sent to all staff to inform them of a change in relation to the joint operating principles for a marauding terrorist attack.

There are well-developed relationships with other organisations involved in emergency response

The service has good arrangements in place to respond to emergencies with other partners that make up the West Midlands LRF. These arrangements include joint training and exercising to test arrangements for a range of incidents, including mass fatalities and collapsed structures.

The service participates in a multi-agency control room managers forum with police and ambulance to share learning and good practice. It is also the lead for the training and exercising workstream of the NFCC's aviation working group. And it has been heavily involved in major exercises at Birmingham Airport.

The service chairs the LRF. Partners, such as the police and local councils, spoke highly of the contribution it makes to joint working, describing it as the driving force in forum activities. The service also participates in a wide range of subgroups and chairs some of these, including the risk assessment working group. 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. For example, the service had been involved in several training exercises to prepare for the Commonwealth Games.

The service is up to date with national learning

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

Efficiency



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



Good

Summary

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

We are pleased overall with how efficient the service is at keeping people safe and secure.

The service has clear plans for how it allocates its money and resources, and it makes sure that it provides value for money to the public.

It uses its workforce well to maximise productivity. And it is looking further at how it can get the best out of staff by removing time spent on unnecessary activity. We also found that the service collaborates well with other organisations to improve how they keep communities safe.

We were particularly impressed with how the service uses and is developing technology to improve efficiency and the service it gives to the public.

We did find that the service could make better use of its estate to improve its efficiency and effectiveness.

Making best use of resources



Good (2019: Good)

West Midlands Fire 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 £108.303m. This is an increase of £4.042m 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's plans support its objectives

The service's financial and workforce plans, including allocating staff to prevention, protection and response, continue to reflect and are consistent with the risks and priorities identified in the CRMP.

The service uses organisational [intelligence](#) to assess if its policies and procedures support the delivery of the CRMP. It then manages its CRMP and other strategic priorities through a sophisticated programme management system. This means that it can make sure that it has enough of the right resources to deliver its priorities. It also evaluates projects to make sure that they are of value to the public.

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. The service plans its revenue budget over a five-year period. It has identified that it needs to make savings in the region of £3.8m over this period and has put measures in place to achieve this. This includes its risk-based crewing project, which will require less staff to provide the same level of service.

The service also uses overtime to good effect to maintain its response standards while saving money. And it will need to use less overtime as it rolls out risk-based crewing.

The service is good at making sure its workforce is productive

We are pleased to see that the service's arrangements for managing performance clearly link resource use to the CRMP and strategic priorities. Station and departmental plans link activity to CRMP priorities, and targets are set for protection, prevention and response. Work is monitored and quality assured. Key performance indicators are monitored at a strategic level to make sure CRMP priorities are being delivered.

The service has identified 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). It has calculated its contribution based on its own staffing and retention strategies.

The service makes sure the workforce's time is as productive as possible. It uses its firefighters well to carry out prevention and protection work as well as responding to incidents. This helps to prevent fires occurring in homes and businesses and makes people safer as a result. The service believes that it can release more capacity by greater co-ordination of their prevention, protection and response roles.

It is also implementing new ways of working, for example, through its risk-based crewing project. This project will help the [control room](#) and incident commanders to be flexible about how they use their resources to respond to incidents based on risk. This model saves money and makes staff more productive by reducing the disruption caused by moving them around the service to fill gaps. The service also has a model that ensures most training can take place locally at stations. This helps to save time and money because staff don't need to travel to a centralised training venue.

The good working practices that the service put in place because of the pandemic are still part of its day-to-day activity. These include an agile working policy to give staff the flexibility to work in a hybrid way. Good technology provision means that colleagues can stay in touch while working remotely.

The service is good at collaborating with others

We are pleased to see the service meets its statutory duty to collaborate, and routinely considers opportunities to collaborate with other emergency responders. For example, it is working with health and social care providers to reduce health inequalities that make people more at risk of having a fire. It supports other fire and rescue services with data and technology and provides legal support for enforcement activity. It also shares some accommodation with the police and shares its control room with Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service.

Collaborative work is aligned to the priorities in the service's CRMP. For example, the service supported the [local resilience forum](#) with the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme by checking all buildings accommodating migrants and asylum seekers to make sure they were safe.

We are satisfied that the service monitors and reviews the benefits and results of its collaborations. But there are no formal structures in place to evaluate collaborative activity to make sure this is providing benefit to the community.

The service has robust business continuity arrangements

The service has good continuity arrangements in place for areas where threats and risks are considered high. These threats and risks are regularly reviewed and tested so that staff are aware of the arrangements and their associated responsibilities. It has plans in place for the control room and in the event of industrial action. These plans are tested regularly and learning points are identified and acted on. It has resilience arrangements for its control room. These include a buddy system with London Fire Brigade and the North West Fire Control, which could take over if the West Midlands control room was out of service. All control staff participate in exercises.

The service manages its finances well

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. It has used external auditors to carry out a value-for-money review and it spends the second lowest amount on non-pay costs out of predominantly urban services in England.

The service has made savings and efficiencies, which haven't affected its operational performance and the service it provides to the public. The introduction of risk-based crewing will contribute to the efficiency savings the service needs to make without impacting on its response standards.

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. When procuring goods and services it works with the seven local authorities in its area to explore opportunities for shared contracts that would save money or provide better value to the public.

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



Good (2019: Good)

West Midlands Fire 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.

Area for improvement

The service should make sure that its estates management programmes are clearly linked to the community risk management plan, and it understands the impact future changes to those programmes may have on its service to 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 provides value for money

The service has a sound understanding of future financial challenges. It plans to mitigate its main or significant financial risks, for example through risk-based crewing. It identified that it needed to make savings of around £3.8m from its revenue budget. The service's training model, delivered locally rather than at a central venue, also helps to save money in terms of travel costs and staff cover.

The underpinning assumptions of the budget are robust, realistic and prudent, and take account of the wider external environment and some scenario planning for future spending reductions. For example, the service has managed its capital expenditure by using [reserves](#), but it is now forecasting a funding gap in the capital programme of £5m in 3 years' time. It plans to start borrowing money, but at the time of our inspection, hadn't considered the increasing rate of inflation in its scenario planning.

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. The objectives in its CRMP are clearly linked to financial efficiency and service improvement.

The service uses its reserves well

The service has a sensible and sustainable plan for using its reserves. It has a general reserve of £6m, which is appropriate for the service. And it has earmarked reserves of £22m for the capital programme, investment in technology and equipment.

These reserves are expected to reduce over the next three years and the service has plans in place to borrow money where it needs to. We did find that the service holds a large number of small reserves that would be better managed through individual budgets. The service intends to reduce these small reserves.

The service doesn't maximise the opportunities presented by its estate

The service has estate and fleet strategies, but it doesn't always exploit opportunities presented by changes in how it uses its estates to improve efficiency and effectiveness.

The service knows how much its fleet costs and it has plans to review this and make savings as part of its risk-based crewing project.

The estates plan consists of a list of premises and planned maintenance costs. It isn't clear how the service plans to make better use of space, make its buildings more energy efficient or for additional income. But we were told that the service is looking into renting part of its headquarters building as less people are using it.

There are some examples of energy efficient measures such as solar panels, new boilers and electric charging points, but it isn't clear how these are prioritised in an overall approach to environmental improvement.

We were told that the service doesn't have enough funding to make improvements to the estate. The costs of products have increased which isn't currently affecting the service but may impact on maintenance in the future.

The service is good at using technology to improve its effectiveness and efficiency

We are encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since the last inspection. The service actively considers how changes in technology and future innovation may affect risk. For example, it is developing a system that stores all information for prevention, protection and risk in one place so it can be easily shared across teams. This means that the service can understand risk better.

It also seeks to exploit opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness presented by changes in technology. It made a significant investment in technology during the pandemic, which helped it to communicate with staff more efficiently. It has also introduced tablets on fire engines for staff to record [safe and well visits](#) and site-specific risk information. This will save time and make sure information is available more quickly. And it is upgrading its technology to improve the way it forecasts and reports on financial performance.

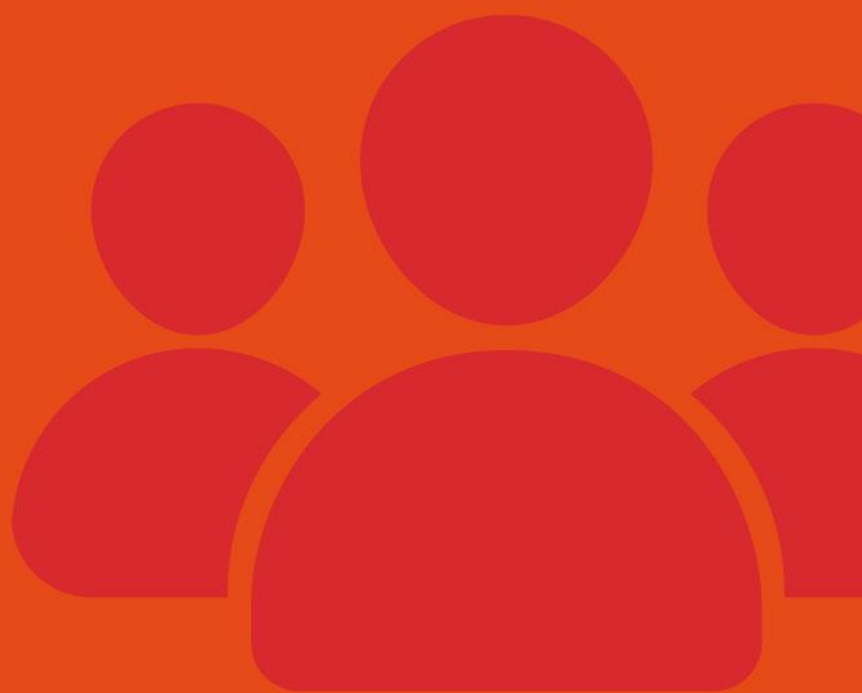
The service has put in place the capacity and capability needed to achieve sustainable transformation, and it routinely seeks opportunities to work with others to improve efficiency and provide better services in the future. The service uses digital technology well to create capacity and capability. For example, by changing the post incident debriefing meetings from face to face to online, it is easier and more efficient for staff to attend, and they can contribute to improving service delivery.

It manages all transformation projects through its programme management team. This makes sure that these are linked to the CRMP priorities, are properly resourced and funded, and provide benefits to the service and community.

The service actively considers how it can generate income

The service actively considers and exploits opportunities for generating extra income. It shares its control room with Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service, which brings in most of its income. It also rents its Safeside education centre to other organisations. And it has installed solar panels on some of its buildings, which generates an income of around £30,000 per year.

People



How well does the service look after its people?



Good

Summary

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

We are pleased with the service's progress since our last inspection in 2019. The service has taken appropriate action to improve the culture of the organisation. It still has some work to do to make sure that everyone behaves in accordance with its values. It takes the well-being and health and safety of its staff seriously and has a wide range of support in place for staff.

There is a strong culture of continuous improvement in the service. And it makes sure it has enough people with the right skills to provide its services. But we found that the service can't keep up to date with officially assessing the competence of staff for risk-critical activities, such as incident command and breathing apparatus.

We are pleased to see that the service has improved the way that it communicates with staff and gets their feedback. It has improved the diversity of its workforce and it works to make sure its culture is inclusive. But there is still more to do to make sure all staff understand why the service should have a workforce that reflects the diversity of its communities.

The service has some good arrangements in place to manage performance and develop leaders. But we did find inconsistencies in the way it manages the temporary promotions process, which has led to some staff thinking this is unfair.

Promoting the right values and culture



Good (2019: Requires improvement)

West Midlands Fire 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.

Area for improvement

The service should ensure its values and behaviours are demonstrated at all levels of the organisation.

Innovative practice: The service has put in place support for staff with symptoms of long COVID

The service has developed a partnership with Midlands Diving Chamber to provide staff with symptoms of long COVID with hyperbaric oxygen therapy. Staff report that this has improved their symptoms. They say it helps with their health and well-being. Helping to keep them at work means they can continue to provide essential services.

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 taken action to improve the culture of the organisation

We are encouraged by the progress the service has made since our last inspection in 2019. It carried out a cultural review to find out what is important to staff and has adopted and adapted the new national [Core Code of Ethics](#). It is now refreshing the cultural review. The service has well-defined values that are understood by staff. Behaviours that reflect those values are shown at most levels. Staff spoke positively about their immediate managers, particularly in terms of the support they received from them. And staff were positive about the most senior leaders in the service. But some staff told us that not all managers demonstrate behaviours in line with the service's values. Some staff described a dictatorial style by some managers and said they weren't acknowledged (in corridors), for example.

Senior leaders act as role models. They have established a leadership team charter, which is aligned to the values and behaviours framework. They visit each [watch](#) on each station on an annual basis to get feedback from staff. During the pandemic the chief fire officer put in place virtual all-staff briefings. These started as daily briefings moving to weekly. Now he holds a fortnightly virtual forum for managers and a monthly virtual all-staff forum. These have been well received by staff.

The service has put in place measures to create a positive working culture. Staff told us that they felt the service communicated well with them and kept them up to date. It also introduced 'brave space talks'. These are forums for staff to discuss sensitive issues in an open and safe way. The service still has some work to do to make sure that all staff feel that they are empowered to challenge poor behaviours when they encounter them.

The service has good workforce well-being provisions in place

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 staff to promote both their physical and mental health.

For example, through its routine health screening the service identified issues with blood pressure, so it has put monitors in all stations. The service has engaged the [Fire Fighters Charity](#) to provide coaching webinars to all staff. These will cover advice for musculoskeletal issues, health and nutrition and mental health. The service has trained 100 staff in health leadership and has trained mental health advocates. It provides monthly mindfulness courses for all staff.

All staff reported they understand the well-being support available and how to access it, and most staff had confidence in it. Of those staff who responded to the survey, 93 percent (327 out of 352) said they could access services to support their mental well-being and 60 (211 out of 352) percent said that they had a conversation with their manager about well-being, and that it was useful.

During the pandemic, the service engaged an external cognitive behavioural therapist to run weekly virtual sessions helping staff to share how they were coping and to provide a safe space to talk.

We were impressed with the support the service has put in place for those staff with symptoms of long COVID. Staff who had benefitted from this support spoke very positively about it.

There is good support in place for staff who have been exposed to a traumatic incident. The service has introduced local arrangements as it recognises that staff often feel more comfortable talking to someone they know well. A psychotherapist provides supervision for all staff involved in carrying out post-incident debriefs. The service regularly evaluates these processes.

The service promotes the health and safety of staff

The service continues to have 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.

Staff we spoke to could confidently describe the daily safety checks and routines they carried out. They could link these to health and safety policies and any issues identified were quickly dealt with.

Both staff and representative bodies have confidence in the health and safety approach taken by the service. Of the staff who responded to the survey, 84 percent (297 out of 352) agreed that their personal safety and welfare is taken seriously, 98 percent (345 out of 352) said that there are clear procedures for reporting accidents and 93 percent (329 out of 352) said they were encouraged to report accidents.

The service monitors staff who have secondary employment or dual contracts to make sure they comply with its policies and don't work excessive hours. The workforce planning team specifically monitors staff who work voluntary additional shifts to make sure they have enough breaks and don't work too many hours.

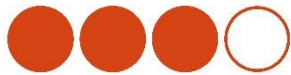
The service manages staff absence well

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. There is a toolkit for managers on the service's intranet page and managers have been trained in having crucial conversations with staff. The cases we reviewed were managed in accordance with the timescales set out in the policy. The service communicated well with staff who were absent from work. It considers making reasonable adjustments to help them return and considers redeployment for those who can't return to their role for health reasons.

Overall, the service has seen a slight increase in firefighter absences in the year to 31 March 2021, compared to the previous year.

Getting the right people with the right skills



Good (2019: Good)

West Midlands Fire 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.

Area for improvement

The service should assure itself that its records of competence for risk-critical skills are accurate and up to date.

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

The service understands the skills and capabilities of its workforce

The service has good workforce planning in place. It makes sure skills and capabilities align with what is needed to effectively deliver the CRMP. For example, at the time of our last inspection in 2019 we found that the service had a significant number of staff on temporary promotion. Since then, the service has carried out an exercise to reduce this number and substantiate people in positions. It still has some temporary promotions in place because it offers staff opportunities to develop in temporary project roles.

The service offers staff additional shifts to good effect to maintain crewing levels. And it moves resources around the service to respond to changing demand and risk. But we did find many vacancies for crew commanders. The service has recognised this and has taken action to address it, including transferring staff from other services.

Workforce and succession planning are subject to consistent scrutiny through regular meetings to discuss requirements. Each command area holds a performance meeting four times a year to review staff competence. This helps to make sure the service has enough trained staff available.

Most staff told us that they could access the training they need to be effective in their role. Station-based staff were positive about the support they received for their development. Staff we spoke to during the inspection could demonstrate their knowledge of skills, such as breathing apparatus and incident command.

The service has a good training model but needs to make sure it can assure the competence of staff

The service's training model is good. Training is devolved to stations, saving operational staff time travelling to a central training venue. This keeps fire engines available and saves money.

Externally qualified and quality-assured subject matter advisers oversee the training delivered locally by station-based assessors who carry out a standardised assessment of staff competence. This is aligned to [national operational guidance](#) and is recorded. A peer assessment team also quality assures training.

Competence is monitored well at station level. Line managers routinely organise training events and observe staff. They regularly monitor competency records and book staff in for the standardised assessments. But this continuous workplace assessment process doesn't count towards the standardised assessment that is included on staff records.

We found that there aren't enough station-based assessors to keep up to date with the standardised assessments. This means that some staff are continuing to carry out risk-critical roles, such as breathing apparatus and incident command, when their records show their standardised assessment of competence is overdue.

We also found examples where staff had failed their standardised assessment and continued in their role. We were told that if a line manager had concerns over a person's competence from the routine training, exercising and observation carried out at stations and at incidents, they would be taken off duty. But the service needs to be confident that it has sufficient assurance of all staff's competence.

There is a system in place to monitor and record the acquisition, application and assessment of skills and competencies. This details what evidence staff need to gain and record, and how often they will be assessed. This information is held on a competency recording system. Station-based staff spoke positively about the system and used it to check the competence of staff. But we found that the service can't get reports from the system on the overall competency of the workforce. The service has recognised that this is a problem and is introducing a new system.

The service continually learns and improves

A culture of continuous improvement is promoted throughout the service and staff are encouraged to learn and develop. Staff we spoke to told us that they were supported by their line managers in their development so they could access promotion opportunities.

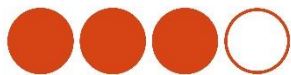
Incident commanders meet on a weekly basis to share learning and carry out exercises. There is a significant amount of training and exercising organised within local command areas.

We are pleased to see that the service has a range of resources in place, many provided by its e-learning academy. As well as operational training there is leadership training, such as degree courses.

There is an organisational [intelligence](#) team that collates and shares learning. We were told national learning and learning from incidents and other organisations is shared effectively throughout the service.

There is a good process to continually review the effectiveness of the service's policies and procedures. After every incident, all staff who attended can rate how effective the associated policies were in helping them to provide the best results. This means that the service is continually learning and improving. This system is also in place for all other policies. For example, when the service was reviewing its policy on managing vacancies, it received over 80 responses from staff.

Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity



Good (2019: Good)

West Midlands Fire 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 equality, diversity and inclusion are firmly understood and demonstrated throughout the organisation. This includes successfully taking steps to remove inequality and making progress to improve fairness, diversity and inclusion at all levels of the service. It should proactively seek and respond to feedback from staff and make sure any action taken is meaningful.

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 good systems in place to seek and act on feedback and challenge from staff

The service has developed several ways to engage with staff on issues and decisions that affect them. This includes methods to build all-staff awareness of fairness and diversity, as well as targeted engagement to identify matters that affect different staff groups.

The service has five stakeholder groups who represent the [protected characteristics](#). These groups seek feedback from staff and hold the service to account. Senior managers regularly visit stations to get feedback from staff. And the service uses the social networking service, Yammer, for staff to ask questions and to keep them informed.

Most staff were positive about the level of communication and engagement. The chief fire officer holds monthly engagement forums, one for all staff and another for middle managers. These are well-attended and are recorded so staff who couldn't attend can view them later.

The service carried out a significant amount of engagement with staff when it was developing the CRMP. It used polls to evaluate the effectiveness of the engagement. And the intranet site has a 'provide feedback' option so staff can comment on projects.

Representative bodies and staff associations reported that the service engages with them well and staff are positive about what the service does, although some still don't feel confident to challenge. Just over half of the staff who responded to the survey (209 out of 352) said they didn't feel confident in the systems for providing feedback to all levels.

The service takes action 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.

Most staff are confident in the service's approach to tackling bullying, harassment and discrimination, grievances and disciplinary matters. There are appropriate policies and procedures in place. The service has trained managers and it has a whistleblowing policy. It has dismissed staff whose behaviours have contravened its values.

Staff we spoke to said they could raise matters of concern with their line manager, and they were confident that concerns would be dealt with appropriately. They said they could get support from the service's diversity, inclusion, cohesion and engagement team.

Representative bodies and staff associations agreed that the service has appropriate processes in place and takes appropriate action to eliminate discrimination.

Despite this, of those staff who responded to the survey, 17 percent (60 out of 352) told us they had felt bullied or harassed and 26 percent (91 out of 352) had felt discriminated against over the past 12 months.

The service has taken action to address disproportionality in recruitment and retention

There is an open, fair and transparent 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 tracks the progress of applicants from the point that they express an interest in a position. It interviews staff who leave the service to understand if the reasons for leaving are related to equality and inclusion issues. The service has a good understanding of the make-up of the workforce, with nearly all staff declaring their ethnicity.

The service has put considerable effort into developing its recruitment processes so that they are fair and understood by potential applicants. It recently revised its policy for managing vacancies and consulted widely with staff on this. The recruitment policies are comprehensive and cover opportunities in all roles. The service has recruited applicants from diverse backgrounds into middle and senior management roles.

But some staff told us that they didn't think the promotion process was fair. And some female staff we spoke to didn't want to apply for promotion because they felt if they were successful, this would be seen by other people as being because of their gender.

The service has made improvements in increasing staff diversity at all levels of the organisation. In the year ending 31 March 2021, almost a quarter of the workforce were women, which is the highest of all services in England. And 13.7 percent self-declared as being from an ethnic minority background compared to the rate for England of 5.3 percent. In the year ending 31 March 2021 of the 108 staff that joined the service, 33 were from an ethnic minority background.

The proportion of women in firefighting roles on 31 March 2021 was 12.1 percent compared to the rate for England of 7.5 percent. And the proportion of firefighters from an ethnic minority background was 12.6 percent. This is an improvement on 5 years previously when 8.1 percent of firefighters were from an ethnic minority background and 5.4 percent were women.

The service has acted positively to improve diversity. The deputy chief fire officer is seen by staff as a positive role model in the service and externally. The staff networking groups support the recruitment process, for example by giving talks in colleges and universities. They told us that the service has worked hard to promote diversity but there is still more to do to ensure the workforce understands why it should reflect its communities.

The service actively promotes equality, diversity and inclusion

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.

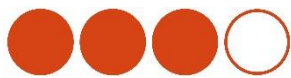
The service's objective is to be a fully inclusive employer. It uses its staff networking groups to good effect to understand the needs of people who are underrepresented in the workplace so that it can work to meet them. The deputy chief fire officer meets regularly with the groups, and they monitor the impact of what the service is doing in relation to EDI. They also recommend improvements and challenge the service where appropriate.

Staff who have protected characteristics talked very positively about the support they had received from the service. And most of the staff we spoke to described a positive and inclusive culture. We saw that each station has a dignity room that can be used for welfare or faith purposes.

Over an 18-month period, all staff have been involved in discussions about positive action. The service's extensive work in this area includes providing a programme of seminars with help from stakeholder groups and discussions through 'brave space talks', voluntary forums for staff to ask questions in a safe environment.

The service has an effective process to assess equality impact. It carries out an initial impact assessment of all changes that take place, as well as new or changed policies and procedures. It then decides if a full equality impact assessment is needed. These quality-assured assessments consider the impact of policies and practices on people with protected characteristics. For example, when the service introduced smoke hoods to help to evacuate people from fires in high-rise buildings, it identified that there was an impact on some religions and people with disabilities. So, it actively engaged with those groups to explain the importance of wearing smoke hoods safely.

Managing performance and developing leaders



Good (2019: Requires improvement)

West Midlands Fire 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.

Area for improvement

The service should review staff in temporary promotion positions to ensure these do not extend beyond the timescales set out in its policy.

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

The service manages the performance of most staff well

There is a good performance management system in place which allows the service to effectively develop and assess individual staff. For example, the service uses its competency recording system to record performance discussions and evidence to support individuals' development.

Most of the station-based staff we spoke to told us they had regular conversations with their manager about performance and found these helpful. They described these as a continuous process with ongoing development discussions linked to organisational learning. But some headquarters-based staff said they don't have performance reviews. We were told that the service doesn't monitor overall completion rates for performance reviews, so it doesn't know if all staff are having them. It is implementing a new system to make this easier to monitor.

In our staff survey 9 percent of respondents (33 out of 352) said that they had never had a discussion with their manager about their performance. This may be reflective of the fact that the performance conversations are a continuous ongoing process rather than a single annual event. But 74 percent of those that did (235 out of 319), said they found the conversation useful.

Promotion and progression processes for substantive roles are managed fairly

The service has put considerable effort into developing its promotion and progression processes so that they are fair and understood by staff. It has recently revised its promotion and progression policies to make sure they are comprehensive and cover opportunities in all roles. Managers involved in interview processes receive training. And staff from human resources quality-assure the processes.

The service has effective succession planning processes in place that allow it to manage the career pathways of its staff, including roles requiring specialist skills. A good example of this is the new development pathway it has created to speed up the time it takes protection staff to become qualified. Staff are multi-skilled in all aspects of protection work. The service also gives staff the opportunity to complete their fire safety qualification before joining the protection team. In this way it can make sure it always has enough qualified staff. The number of qualified staff has increased from 9 to 50 over the last 5 years.

Selection processes for appointments to substantive positions are managed consistently. We reviewed some promotion files and found that all had been carried out in accordance with policy. We were pleased to see that the service asks all those involved in a process to provide feedback.

The service uses temporary promotions for projects to provide development opportunities for staff. But we found that the process for appointing to temporary promotions was inconsistent and there was evidence they were in place for longer than appropriate. This was seen as unfair, particularly as the selection process wasn't open to all staff.

The service has some processes in place to develop leadership and high-potential staff

The service has some succession planning processes in place that allow it to manage high-potential staff into leadership roles.

When the service carried out its cultural review it identified that it needed to improve the way it managed performance and developed leaders. Previously, there were limited opportunities for control and non-operational staff to progress in the service. The service is now changing the way people can progress by introducing more opportunities for staff to move into different roles at the same level to gain wider experience. These opportunities will be open to all staff. We look forward to seeing how this helps the service to develop talent.

The service has several leadership programmes in place. Forty staff are currently undergoing a management degree programme accredited through Coventry University. It also has a managing for excellence programme and a personal effectiveness programme, both designed to develop leadership skills and behaviours and align to the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#) leadership framework.

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