

Fire & Rescue Service 2023–25

Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service

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Changes to this round of inspection

We last inspected Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service in March 2022. And in January 2023, we published our inspection report with our findings on the service's effectiveness and efficiency and how well it looks after its people.

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

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

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

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

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

More information on [how we assess fire and rescue services](#) and [our graded judgments](#) is available on our website.

Overall summary

Our judgments

Our inspection assessed how well Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service has performed in 11 areas. We have made the following graded judgments:

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

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

HMI summary

I am grateful for the positive and constructive way in which Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service staff worked with our inspection team.

However, I have concerns about the performance of Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service in how it looks after its people. In particular, I have serious concerns that staff reported that there wasn't a consistently positive and inclusive culture in the service.

I recognise that, overall, there have been improvements in some areas, but I am disappointed to see that the service hasn't made the progress we expected since our 2022 inspection.

Many areas have deteriorated, particularly in relation to efficiency and how the service treats its people.

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

- I am concerned that not all senior leaders act as role models or show that they are committed to the service's values through their behaviours.
- The service needs to improve communications between staff and senior leaders, and create a safer environment in which staff feel confident providing feedback and challenging senior leaders.
- Senior leaders aren't providing effective strategic oversight of day-to-day operations, too many policies are out of date, and the service isn't responding promptly to issues raised by managers and the wider workforce.
- While the service does have IT improvement plans, its current IT infrastructure is inefficient and is failing staff.
- The service hasn't made equality, diversity and inclusion a high enough priority.

In view of these findings, I have been in regular contact with the chief fire officer, as I don't underestimate the improvements that are needed. I will keep in close contact with the service to monitor its progress in addressing the cause of concern and associated recommendations.



Lee Freeman

HM Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Service in numbers



Profile

	Suffolk	England
Area		
Square miles	1,468	50,370
Population (thousands)		
30 June 2023	776	57,690
Population density		
Thousands per square mile	0.5	1.1



Cost

Funding		
Year ending 31 March 2023		£2.5bn
Expenditure per population		
Year ending 31 March 2023	£38.17	£46.66

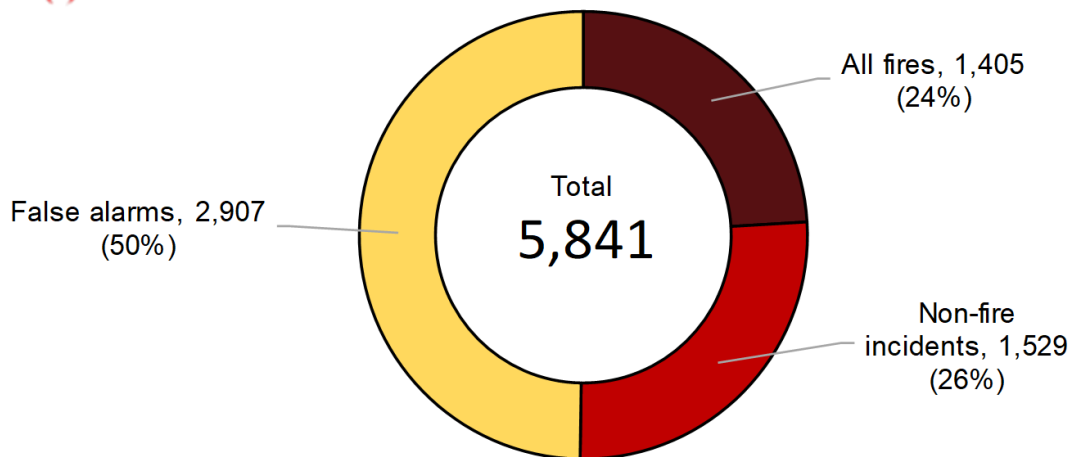


Response

Incidents attended per 1,000 population		
Year ending 31 March 2024	7.5	10.4
Home fire safety visits carried out by fire and rescue service per 1,000 population		
Year ending 31 March 2024	4.6	9.8
Fire safety audits per 100 known premises		
Year ending 31 March 2024	3.0	2.0
Availability of wholetime pumps		
Year ending 31 March 2024	100.0%	
Availability of on-call pumps		
Year ending 31 March 2024	75.9%	



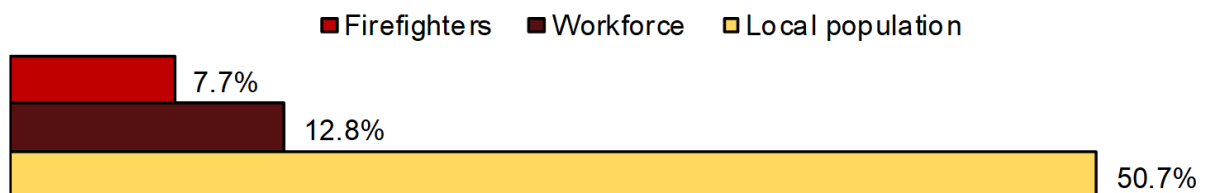
Incidents attended in year ending 31 March 2024



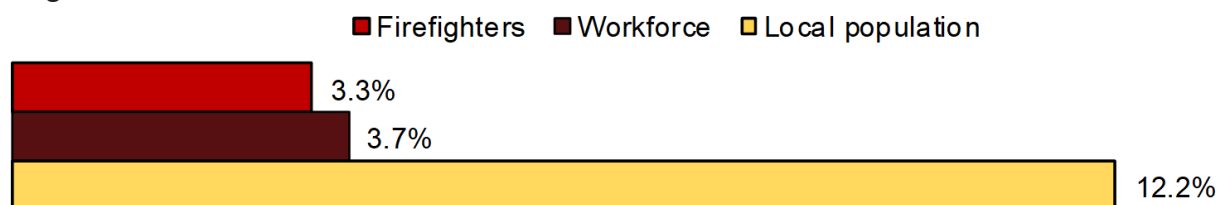
Workforce

	Suffolk	England
Five-year change in total workforce 2018 to 2023	4.4%	1.5%
Number of firefighters per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2023	0.77	0.61
Percentage of firefighters who are wholetime Year ending 31 March 2023	34.8%	65.3%

Percentage of firefighters, workforce and population who identified as a woman as at 31 March 2023



Percentage of firefighters, workforce and population who were from ethnic minority backgrounds as at 31 March 2023



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

Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies

Requires improvement

Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at understanding risk.

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

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure it has effective strategic oversight arrangements in place to manage foreseeable and known risks.

The service should make sure its firefighters have access to relevant and up-to-date risk information.

The service should make sure it has an effective information management system in place to support information reporting at different levels across its functions.

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

Main findings

The service is good at identifying risk in the communities it serves

The service assesses an appropriate range of risks and threats after a thorough community risk management planning process. When assessing risk, it considers relevant information collected from a broad range of internal and external sources, including incident and societal datasets. For example, the service uses data, reports and analysis from the [Suffolk Office of Data and Analytics \(SODA\)](#) to inform its strategic assessment of risk. This includes information relating to demographics (on topics such as ethnicity, diversity and health) and housing (on topics such as listed buildings, thatched properties, blocks of flats and people living in poverty). After assessing relevant risks, the service records its findings in an easily understood [community risk management plan \(CRMP\)](#). This plan describes how prevention, protection and response activities will mitigate or reduce the risks and threats the community faces, both now and in the future.

The service held consultations with its communities and other relevant parties to inform the design of its CRMP. For example, it held several public roadshows, targeting hard-to-reach people through community centres, and met with parish, district and county councils. Its CRMP consultation received about 440 responses, and had 2,000 views on its dedicated webpage and 17,188 social media hits.

The service has an effective CRMP

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

For example, it sets out measures for:

- managing local risk;
- responding to emerging risks;
- reducing community risk and vulnerability;
- keeping people safe in the built environment;
- responding to fire and other emergencies; and
- improving recruitment and retention.

The service uses a range of data, including societal and historical incident data, to make sure its fire stations are in the correct locations. The service's CRMP has been externally validated and assured.

The service learns from national operational activity

The service has processes to record and communicate risk information across the organisation. It also updates risk assessments and uses feedback from local and national operational activities to inform its planning assumptions.

The service has dedicated staff for the internal communication of [national operational guidance](#) and lessons learned from national operational work. The service's organisational assurance group reviews emerging information gathered from the service's operational activity and changes its approach to risks where needed.

The service doesn't have effective strategic oversight arrangements in place to manage foreseeable and known risks

We found that the service's arrangements for managing foreseeable and known risks created by work activities were weak. The governance, oversight and assurance processes in place weren't effective.

Senior leaders were given early notice from staff and others that work would need to be done to mitigate or reduce the foreseeable and known risks arising from changing the old control system to a new one. This work wasn't effectively carried out. The service had to initiate continuity processes at additional cost, including staff working overtime. Some IT systems were still failing and we have outlined the details of this further in this report.

The service doesn't have an effective information management system in place to support information reporting at different levels

We found that the service failed to put in place reasonable actions to mitigate the possibility of losing its incident information management system, which it calls its ops viewing platform, prior to the changeover from the old control system to a new one. The operational viewing platform provides real-time updates on incidents the service attends as well as a full audit log of activity, which can be used for management information reporting at different levels.

Fire and rescue services should be able to monitor their prevention key performance indicators, known in this service as [performance measures](#), throughout the year. However, the service can't do this in a timely fashion. For example, if there is a spate of fires in the area, the service won't be able to recognise any patterns or links between the incidents until several months after they have taken place.

During this inspection, we found that the service has had to employ an external company to rectify this issue. This did, however, create an in-year saving.

The service needs to do more to make sure its firefighters have access to relevant and up-to-date risk information

The service routinely collects and updates the information it has about the highest-risk people, places and threats. Operational staff routinely gather risk information from businesses, and staff who are qualified in fire protection inspect and audit premises for fire safety compliance.

We sampled a broad range of the risk information the service collects, including information from [safe and well visits](#), site-specific risk information, information on temporary risk, and protection files. [Vulnerable person](#) and premises information is collected and recorded on a central database, called the premise management system. But we found that the service didn't always update the site-specific risk information in this system as quickly as it should.

The service doesn't have an effective procedure in place to make sure the information it collects on risk is readily available throughout the service. The service has introduced a new additional site-specific risk information capture form, which is paper based and needs to be uploaded on to a computer by the information gatherer. The information is then forwarded to the service's business support team to be uploaded to the service's [mobile data terminals](#). There is no procedure outlining how quickly/in what timescale the information must be uploaded to the terminals.

We also found that there are no formal forums for sharing risk information, where appropriate, between the service's prevention, protection and response functions.

This means the service can't effectively identify, reduce and mitigate risk.

Preventing fires and other risks

Good

Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service is good at preventing fires and other risks.

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

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

Main findings

The service is effectively implementing its prevention strategy

In our previous inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should make sure it allocates enough resources to implement its prevention strategy. The service has made good progress in this area, so we have closed this area for improvement.

The reallocation of resources and investment to its prevention activities has improved the service's performance. The service's prevention strategy is clearly linked to the risks it has identified in its CRMP. The plan recognises the factors that contribute to vulnerability and defines how the service and its partners work to reduce risk through a range of initiatives.

The service's teams work well together and with other relevant organisations on prevention, and they share relevant information when needed. For example, the service is increasing its prevention work in rural communities and focusing its prevention work on [hard-to-reach communities](#).

The service has community safety staff dedicated to water safety, road safety, schools and partnerships. It also has dedicated [safeguarding](#) leads, which allows it to make appropriate referrals to the right agencies and support people most vulnerable to fire and other risks.

The service's teams work well together and with other relevant organisations on prevention, and share relevant information when needed. This includes:

- getting referrals from West Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust and the community equipment service [Medequip](#);
- reducing rural fires by targeting thatched premises and working with the National Farmers' Union; and
- being provided with oxygen data (on people who have medical oxygen supplies in their homes) from gas provider [BOC](#) and road traffic data from [National Highways](#) to reduce fire risk in the home and on the road.

The service has improved the targeting of its prevention activities

The service uses a broad range of data and information to target its prevention activities. It uses a risk-based approach to clearly prioritise its prevention activities towards people most at risk from fire and other emergencies.

It uses a broad range of data and information to target its prevention activities at vulnerable individuals and groups. This includes health data from adult social care and the NHS.

The service carries out [home fire safety visits](#). It assesses whether a person needs a check by using eligibility criteria such as age, smoking habits, mental health conditions and vulnerabilities. The levels of this activity have increased. In the year ending 31 March 2024, the service carried out 3,552 home fire safety visits, 726 more than in the previous year. However, the number of prevention visits the service carries out is still lower than the national rate. In 2023/24, the service carried out 4.6 home fire safety visits per 1,000 population, while the national rate is 10.37.

The service has developed good relations with a range of partner organisations in the health and care sector. These partners refer individuals who would benefit from a home fire safety visit to the fire and rescue service. In 2023/24, the service carried out 1,113 visits as a result of referrals from these organisations.

Staff are confident at providing home fire safety visits

Staff told us they have the right skills and confidence to make home fire safety visits. These visits are [person centred](#) and cover an appropriate range of hazards that can put vulnerable people at greater risk of fire and other emergencies. The checks focus on:

- home fire detection and assistive technology;
- general fire safety (candles, cooking, and escape planning);
- electrical safety;
- fire and heaters (safer heating);
- clutter and hoarding;

- deliberate fire setting;
- smoking-related fires; and
- medicines and medical devices.

The service is good at responding 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 respond appropriately and promptly to such problems. We saw that staff regularly recognised vulnerabilities and risks during visits and acted appropriately to improve people's safety. This included escalating matters to their safeguarding managers or making a referral to a partner agency. The service has dedicated staff working with Suffolk's [multi-agency safeguarding hubs](#).

The service works well with other organisations to reduce the number of fires and other emergencies

The service works with a wide range of other organisations to prevent fires and other emergencies. Arrangements are also in place to receive referrals from other agencies. These include:

- [East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust](#);
- [East Suffolk health protection teams](#);
- [Associated British Ports](#);
- [National Farmers' Union](#);
- [Suffolk Sight](#);
- [Safe Suffolk Renters](#); and
- [Cadent gas network](#).

The service acts appropriately on the referrals it receives. For example, it is part of the [Suffolk Information Partnership](#), a large referral partnership enterprise with links to around 500 agencies, designed to make it easier to find referral agencies. If the police or ambulance service visit a home and have fire concerns due to hoarding or lack of smoke detectors, they can refer the person to Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service and any other relevant partners via the Suffolk Information Partnership.

The service routinely exchanges information with other public sector organisations about people and groups at greatest risk. It uses this information to challenge planning assumptions and target prevention activities.

The service is taking some action to tackle fire-setting behaviour

The service has limited involvement in targeting and educating people who show signs of firesetting behaviour. It is aware of this and has identified, through its CRMP, the need for a firesetters programme. This is work in progress.

We were told that the service has trained four staff members in the [Firesetters' Integrated Responsive Educational Programme \(FIRE-P\)](#) adult firesetters course. This course has been accredited by the University of Portsmouth and is part of a regional approach to reducing deliberate fires. We are interested to see how this develops.

The service is now evaluating its prevention activities

In our previous two inspections, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should better evaluate its prevention work so it can understand the benefits of this work more clearly. The service has made good progress in this area, so we have closed this area for improvement.

The service has good evaluation tools in place to measure how effective its activity is and to make sure all sections of its community get access to appropriate prevention services. For example, it commissioned an external company to evaluate its [ItCanWait](#) road safety programme. The service provides this programme to 15 to 18-year-olds through educational establishments and youth groups. The evaluation was positive, showing that, after completing the programme, attendees indicated they were less willing to use their mobile phones when driving.

The service's prevention activities take account of feedback from the public, other organisations and other parts of the service. For example, the service uses feedback to inform its planning assumptions and change future activity so it can focus on what works and what the community needs.

Protecting the public through fire regulation

Good

Suffolk Fire and Rescue 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.

Area for improvement

The service should make sure it has an effective quality assurance process so that staff can carry out audits to an appropriate standard.

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

Main findings

Protection is clearly linked to the CRMP

Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service has a prevention, protection and service business support team management plan. This is supported by a risk-based inspection policy and enforcement policy. 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 and exchange information effectively as needed. We found that information was often exchanged informally, and therefore some work takes place in isolation.

The service uses this protection information to adjust planning assumptions and direct activity between its protection, prevention and response functions. This means that resources are properly aligned to risk.

The service aligns protection activity with risk, but the consistency of audits needs to improve

Since our previous inspection, the service has reviewed and is updating the risk categorisation used in its risk-based inspection programme to align with national guidance (which is based on a model called the provision of operational risk information system).

The service's risk-based inspection programme is focused on the service's highest-risk buildings.

We reviewed a range of audits that the service had carried out at different buildings across its area. These included audits carried out:

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

We found that the service isn't consistently auditing the buildings it has targeted in the timescales it has set.

The service's IT systems aren't effective, and there is a lack of capability and capacity in the IT team. Therefore, staff in the risk team have to manually update the new operational risk information system. We found examples of the inaccurate transfer of visit frequencies and risk scores for premises on to the updated system. And we found that some premises hadn't had an inspection within the required timescales during the time the old system and new system were in place.

The service still needs to establish regular quality assurance

Since our last inspection, the service has introduced a new quality assurance process for its protection activity. However, we found little evidence of the process being routinely applied to the service's protection work, so more needs to be done to make sure it is used regularly to improve the consistency and quality of protection work. None of the fire safety audits we reviewed had received a quality assurance review.

Without regular and consistent quality assurance, the service can't guarantee the consistency and quality of its fire safety inspectors' work. It will also miss opportunities to identify learning opportunities and instances of good practice to share with its protection staff.

The service is effectively using its enforcement powers

During this inspection, we were pleased to find that the service consistently used its full range of enforcement powers and, when appropriate, it prosecuted those who didn't comply with fire safety regulations.

The service's enforcement policy statement is aligned with the regulators' code, which makes sure that enforcement actions are proportionate. The service has a good enforcement team and access to a specialist fire safety barrister for complex cases.

In the year ending 31 March 2024, the service issued no alteration notices, 211 informal notifications, 13 enforcement notices and 15 prohibition notices, and carried out no prosecutions. However, it had completed four prosecutions in the five years from 31 March 2019 to 31 March 2024.

The service's protection team is well trained and well resourced

The service has enough qualified protection staff to meet the requirements of its risk-based inspection programme. This helps it provide the range of audit and enforcement activity needed, both now and in the future. Staff get the right training and work to appropriate accreditation.

In the year ending 31 March 2024, the service carried out 3.0 fire safety audits per 100 known premises, while the national rate is 2.0. It had 33 full-time equivalent members of staff able to carry out audits in 2023/24, compared with 26 the previous year.

The service is making good use of the Government's uplift grant. For example, we were told that the service invested in an intern to evaluate its protection activity. Part of the intern's role was to set up an easy way of evaluating the inspection process. They created a QR code, which is sent to the person responsible for the premises inspected and directs them to an online evaluation survey. This has been built on and, since April 2024, the survey has also collected equality data.

The service is adapting to new legislation

The service is supporting the introduction of the [Building Safety Regulator](#). The service has seconded staff to training and work in this area. It expects that the effect of these arrangements on its other protection activity will be manageable.

The [Fire Safety \(England\) Regulations 2022](#) introduced a range of duties for the managers of tall buildings. These include a requirement to provide the fire and rescue service with floor plans and inform the service of any substantial faults to essential firefighting equipment, such as firefighting lifts.

We found that the service has good arrangements in place to receive this information. When it doesn't receive the right information, it takes action. And it accordingly updates the risk information it gives its operational staff.

The service works well with other enforcement agencies

The service works closely with other enforcement agencies to regulate fire safety, and it routinely exchanges risk information with them. For example:

- The service is an active member of local [safety advisory groups](#), with which it shares risk information and intelligence.
- It participates in joint enforcement work with housing and licensing agencies, as well as the police force.

The service's response to building and licensing consultations has improved

In our previous inspection, we had concerns that the service wasn't always responding to building and licensing consultations in a timely manner. Good progress has been made in this area.

The service now responds to more building consultations on time. This means that it consistently meets its statutory responsibility to comment on fire safety arrangements at new and altered buildings. In the year ending 31 March 2024, the service responded to 98.5 percent of building consultations and 92.4 percent of licensing consultations within the required time. This was an increase on the year ending 31 March 2023 when the service responded to 94.8 percent of building consultations and 91.0 percent of licensing consultations within the required time.

The service works effectively with other organisations on enforcement activity

The service proactively works with local businesses and other organisations to promote compliance with fire safety legislation. For example, the service is an active and valued member of Suffolk's various safety advisory groups and works to make sure members of the public are safe at sporting and community events. It also carries out joint fire safety inspection and enforcement activity with local authority property enforcement officers.

The service works as a main partner with a wide range of enforcement agencies, such as [Suffolk County Council's Trading Standards](#) department, the [Environment Agency](#) and local authority housing teams. And it has taken joint action to make sure that asylum seekers and refugees are safe from fires and other risks.

The service has good plans to reduce the number of times it attends unwanted fire signals

In our previous inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should make sure it effectively addressed the burden of false alarms. The service has made good progress in this area, so we have closed this area for improvement.

The service has implemented a new policy to help it better understand and reduce the number of unwanted fire signals and automatic fire alarms. However, more needs to be done to further reduce these incidents.

In the year ending 31 March 2024, 28.0 percent of emergency calls received (2,803 out of 10,010) were due to automatic fire alarms. This is a reduction on 30.1 percent (3,087 out of 10,261) in the previous year. The number of automatic fire alarms not attended by the service has also fallen. In the year ending 31 March 2024, the service didn't attend 18.0 percent of automatic fire alarms (505 out of 2,803). In the year ending 31 March 2023, the service didn't attend 28.5 percent of automatic fire alarms (879 out of 3,087).

In this inspection, we found that the service had introduced a good unwanted fire signal policy that mirrors the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#)'s guidance on call filtering. The service will get fewer unwanted calls because of this. This means that fire engines are available to respond to genuine incidents rather than false ones. It also reduces the risk to the public, as more fire engines are available for genuine incidents, and fewer fire engines are travelling unnecessarily at high speed on the roads. It also has good, data-led plans to further reduce the effect of unwanted fire signals, and we are interested to see how these develop.

Responding to fires and other emergencies

Requires improvement

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

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

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure its [mobile data terminals](#) are reliable so firefighters can easily access up-to-date risk information.

The service should make sure it has an effective system to learn from operational incidents.

The service should make sure it gives relevant information to the public about ongoing incidents to help keep the public safe during and after incidents.

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

Main findings

The service's response plan is aligned to risks identified in its CRMP

The service's response strategy is linked to the risks identified in its CRMP. The location of its fire engines and response staff and the design of its response staff's working patterns help the service to respond flexibly to fires and other emergencies with the appropriate resources.

The service's operational response reviews have identified changes that should improve its response and availability. For example, it now uses an on-call crewing reserve cohort (known as county day crewing) to fill gaps at stations where there are staff shortages. The service has 35 stations, 43 fire engines and a range of specialist vehicles strategically situated around Suffolk. It has effective measures in place to make sure there are enough staff to operate these resources.

The service prioritises covering its on-call strategic stations to improve its response standard. It uses its on-call capacity to cover other stations and carry out prevention and protection activities.

Risk information isn't always readily available

We sampled a range of risk information, including:

- records on the service's community fire risk information management system; and
- site-specific risk information records on fire engines' mobile data terminals.

The records included information in place for firefighters responding to incidents at high-risk, high-rise buildings, and the information held by [fire control](#).

We were particularly worried that there was an increase in mobile data terminal failures following the control system changeover. Firefighters told us that the terminals were unreliable and would freeze regularly, which prevented operational staff from accessing site-specific risk information. This has now improved, but the service should have done more to mitigate the issue.

The service needs to improve how it shares learning from operational incidents

As part of our inspection, we reviewed a range of emergency incidents and training events. These included:

- domestic fires;
- commercial premises fires;
- water rescues; and
- major incidents.

We found that the service has a good organisational assurance, monitoring and debrief policy. We found many good examples of learning recorded through its debriefing processes. It has staff dedicated to the internal communication of national operational guidance and lessons learned from local operational work. The service's organisational risk and improvement group reviews emerging information gathered from the service's operational activity and makes recommendations to change its approach to risks where needed.

However, the service doesn't always act on learning or feedback from local activity. We found instances of senior leaders being informed of local operational learning, including learning from the incident debriefing process, but not acknowledging or acting on it.

This means that the service isn't routinely improving its service to the public.

The service needs to improve its arrangements for keeping the public informed

The service doesn't have good systems in place to inform the public about ongoing incidents and help keep them safe during and after such incidents. For example, following its joint control system changeover, the service no longer has an operational viewing platform. It is no longer able to provide live incident information to the public on its external website.

We also found that staff lacked media training. Social media management is ad hoc and left to stations and business support staff. This could lead to unintended breaches of confidentiality and privacy, which could damage the service's reputation and credibility.

The service doesn't always meet 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.

The service aims to respond as follows:

- to have the first fire engine at a [dwelling fire](#) within 11 minutes for 80 percent of incidents;
- to have the secondary fire engine at a dwelling fire within 16 minutes for 80 percent of incidents; and
- to have the first fire engine at a road traffic collision within 13 minutes for 80 percent of incidents.

Since our last inspection, the service has introduced an additional response standard measure:

- to have the first fire engine at all incident types within 20 minutes for 80 percent of incidents.

The service doesn't always meet its own standards. Data provided by the service shows that in the year ending 31 March 2024, the service's response time target for the first fire engine at dwelling fires was achieved 69 percent of the time, for road traffic collisions 67 percent of the time, and for all incident types 95 percent of the time.

The service's on-call availability is declining

To support its response strategy, the service aims to have all its [wholetime](#) fire engines available on all occasions. The service consistently meets this standard. However, on-call fire engine availability is declining. In the year ending 31 March 2021, on-call fire engines were available on 93.1 percent of occasions overall. This had declined to 75.9 percent as in the year ending 31 March 2024. A recruitment freeze has had an effect. However, the service told us that it is adopting the new pay bandings for on-call staff in 2025 to improve availability and retention.

Staff have a good understanding of how to command incidents safely

The service has trained incident commanders, who are assessed regularly and properly. It has an effective system to make sure that they have regular level two, three and four incident command training. It uses internal and externally accredited training providers to assess commanders' command competence every two years. As at 31 March 2024, all 249 incident commanders were appropriately accredited. This helps the service to safely, assertively and effectively manage the range of incidents it could face, from small, routine ones to complex multi-agency incidents.

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

The service's control arrangements are changing

The service has a combined fire control with Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service. One fire control, based in Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service's headquarters in Huntingdon, handles all 999 calls for both services.

However, Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service is moving away from this collaboration and developing its own command and control centre, which will be operational in 2025. This will incur costs and result in challenges, which we have identified in this report. We are interested to see how this develops.

Responding to major and multi-agency incidents

Adequate

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

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

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure it has an effective method of sharing [fire survival guidance](#) information with multiple callers and that it has a dedicated communication link in place.

The service should make sure that it is well prepared to form part of a multi-agency response to major incidents. It should make sure that its procedures for responding are understood by all staff and are well tested.

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

Main findings

The service is 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 community risk management planning. They include:

- [Control of Major Accident Hazard \(COMAH\) sites](#);
- flooding;
- severe weather; and

- [human health](#).

The service is also familiar with the significant risks that neighbouring fire and rescue services may face, and which it might reasonably be asked to respond to in an emergency. These include COMAH site incidents and flooding on Suffolk's east coast. Firefighters have access to risk information from neighbouring services.

The service needs to make sure its policies are up to date to effectively form part of a multi-agency response to a terrorist incident

As part of our inspection, we reviewed the service's policies. We found that it didn't have an up-to-date marauding terrorist attack policy. We were told this was due to a failure to agree on such a policy with local unions.

However, we were told, and we were able to confirm, that the service has been training operational middle managers and above to the current national guidance. It is also participating in joint exercises with Norfolk Fire and Rescue Service.

The service should make sure that its electronic method of handling multiple fire survival guidance calls is effective

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

In this inspection, we focused on how well prepared the service is to respond to a major incident at a tall building, such as the tragedy at Grenfell Tower in west London in 2017.

At this type of incident, a fire and rescue service would receive a high volume of fire calls simultaneously. During this inspection, we tested the service's systems for sharing fire survival guidance and reviewed how the fire control room directly communicated with the incident commander.

The service has carried out realistic training and exercises at tall buildings. But this didn't include testing an electronic method of sharing information about fire survival guidance between the incident command unit, the bridgehead (the position where firefighters are carrying out firefighting operations) and the fire control room. We were disappointed to find that operational commanders had only just received training on the electronic method of sharing information, and only the first-time firefighters who were staffing/working in the incident command unit had seen the electronic information-sharing system. We also found that the electronic method of sharing information was only capable of sharing information between the operational commander in the control room and the commander in the incident command unit, not the bridgehead.

We found that the service didn't have an effective dedicated communication link between the fire control room and the incident commander. During the testing, the service's dedicated communications link was via mobile phone. This failed immediately, and it would likely also fail during an incident where a large volume of calls would be made by mobile phone.

This could compromise the service's ability to safely resolve a major incident at a tall building.

The service works well with other fire and rescue services

The service supports other fire and rescue services responding to emergency incidents. For example, the service has specialist, national interagency liaison officers who provide 24-hour cover to support its marauding terrorist attack response and [national resilience assets](#). This support is made up of the following:

- mass decontamination unit
- mass decontamination support unit
- waste fire tactical advisor
- airwave tactical advisors
- wildfire tactical advisors
- national water rescue boat teams
- national water incident managers
- chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear incident tactical advisors.

The service can operate with other services and form part of a multi-agency response.

The service takes part in cross-border exercises

In our previous inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should make sure it participated in a programme of cross-border exercises and shared the learning from these exercises. The service has made good progress in this area, so we have closed this area for improvement.

The service has a cross-border exercise plan with neighbouring fire and rescue services, helping them work together effectively to keep the public safe. The plan covers major events at which the service could foreseeably be asked to give support or require help from neighbouring services. The service participated in the recent Government-run power outage exercises Mighty Oak, which simulated a national power outage, and Diamond Dragon, which tested local tactical plans. We were encouraged to see that the service used feedback from these exercises to inform risk information and service plans.

The service has improved its training with other services. In the year ending 31 March 2024, the service completed 17 training exercises with neighbouring fire and rescue services. This is an increase on the year ending 31 March 2023, when the service completed four training exercises with neighbouring fire and rescue services.

Incident commanders have a good understanding of JESIP

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

The service gave us strong evidence that it consistently followed JESIP principles. This included:

- staff having knowledge of and making use of the joint decision-making model; and
- using messaging that all emergency services and related agencies understand.

We sampled a range of debriefs that the service had carried out after multi-agency incidents and/or exercises.

We found that the service had a good organisational assurance, monitoring and debrief policy. Some staff could recall the collecting and sharing of risk information and operational learning through formal or informal debriefs.

The service is an active member and lead partner of the local resilience forum

The service has good arrangements in place to respond to emergencies with other [Category 1 and 2 responders](#) within the [local resilience forum \(LRF\)](#).

These arrangements include dedicated staff available to respond to requests from partners, such as the Royal Air Force and joint emergency planning unit.

The service is a valued partner. The chief fire officer is the chair of the [Suffolk Prepared LRF](#), and staff chair the LRF's tactical co-ordinating groups and are trained as loggists (notetakers for formal emergency management meetings). 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.

The service keeps up to date with national learning

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

Making best use of resources

Requires improvement

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

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

The service's revenue budget for 2024/25 is £30.8 million. This is a 21 percent increase from the previous financial year.

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure there are appropriate strategic oversight arrangements in place to manage day-to-day operations, and that the internal governance structure is clear to staff.

The service should make sure it has effective internal processes for staff to report on health and safety, occupational health, and risks and improvement, and that prompt action is taken where appropriate.

The service should make sure it has access to accurate data and analysis to support effective performance management.

The service should make sure it has robust processes for reviewing its policies and procedures.

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

Main findings

The internal governance structure isn't clear to staff, and the strategic oversight arrangements in place to manage day-to-day operations aren't effective

In our previous inspection, we found that the service structure supported performance management at a strategic level, and performance reporting was good. It has subsequently developed and implemented a new performance assurance framework with four governance boards – a senior leadership board; people board; performance assurance board; and programme board – to improve internal governance and performance. The framework was developed in September 2022, but the service told us the implementation had been slow. Although the governance boards had been sitting, staff told us that the current governance structure was unclear.

The service monitors and reports on 15 key performance measures. They are monitored internally on a quarterly basis at the performance assurance board and through [Power BI](#) dashboards. They are reported on through a quarterly performance assurance report to the fire authority via the fire and rescue service steering group and the county council's corporate and joint leadership teams. The performance measures are mainly operationally focused, but some person-centred data (such as absence) is reported quarterly.

However, the service isn't effectively monitoring, reporting and managing day-to-day operations. Strategic managers have been focused on implementing the control project at the expense of usual activities and staff well-being.

We found that staff had raised concerns that the decision to withdraw the service's IT apprenticeship posts and shift from in-house software development to off-the-shelf and cloud-based software would risk leaving the current service-critical systems unsupported. These concerns weren't acknowledged or allowed to escalate to a governance board, which meant the service had missed opportunities to manage and reduce foreseeable risks, as well as make improvements.

We found that the service's health and safety, occupational health, and risk and improvement departments didn't have direct access to its governance boards. We found examples of staff raising risk-critical issues with strategic managers that weren't acknowledged or allowed to escalate to a governance board.

The service needs to make sure that there are effective processes in place for staff to report issues relating to health and safety, occupational health, and risks and improvement, and that these concerns are addressed promptly.

The service needs to make sure its policies and procedures are up to date, and accurate data is used to manage performance effectively

In this inspection, we found that the service's strategic oversight arrangements weren't effective. As part of the inspection process, we reviewed policies, procedures and data. Worryingly, we found that many policies were out of date, and some hadn't been reviewed for over ten years. Disappointingly, most policies hadn't been through an [equality impact assessment](#).

We identified a pattern of the service not appropriately collecting or analysing data. As a result, it hadn't been supplying us and other data collectors in the sector with data requested, such as details of its wholetime firefighters' external secondary employment. We also identified data quality issues when triangulating service data. And, in the service, multiple departments told us that data, particularly HR data, could be inaccurate and required extensive cleansing to be useable.

The service should make sure that it has robust processes for reviewing its policies and procedures, that its policies and procedures go through an equality impact assessment, and that staff have access to accurate data.

The service has more clearly allocated resources to support the activity set out in its CRMP

In our previous inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that the service needed to show a clear rationale for the resources allocated to its prevention, protection and response activities. This should have been linked to the risks and priorities set out in its CRMP. The service has made good progress in this area, so we have closed this area for improvement.

We were encouraged to see the improvements the service had made since our last inspection. The service's financial and workforce plans, including the allocation of resources to prevention, protection and response, are consistent with the risks and priorities identified in its CRMP. It has reallocated its resources to better meet its prevention objectives. And it has allocated enough protection resources to carry out its risk-based inspection programme.

The service has evaluated its mix of crewing and duty systems. It has analysed its response cover and can show that it deploys its fire engines and response staff to manage risk efficiently. It has used external independent analysts to support this work.

The service has a clear capital spend strategy. Suffolk's fire and public safety directorate has been allocated a capital budget of £14 million for 2024/25 to 2028/29. This includes £923,000 for the fire control centre, with £780,000 provided in 2024/25 and £143,000 in 2025/26. The capital budget is intended to provide for:

- operational equipment;
- vehicle renewals;

- IT equipment; and
- property improvement.

The service builds its plans on sound scenarios, which are underpinned by financial controls that reduce the risk of misusing public money, and help make sure the service is sustainable.

The service has improved how it manages individual performance to make sure its workforce uses its time in line with the priorities in its CRMP

In our previous inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should make sure that its performance management arrangements allowed its workforce to use its time in line with the priorities in its CRMP. The service has made good progress in this area, so we have closed this area for improvement.

In our previous inspection, we found that the service's arrangements for managing performance were weak and didn't clearly link resource use to its CRMP and strategic priorities. We found that station plans lacked detail, on-call firefighters didn't carry out prevention activities, and wholetime firefighters had a performance target of carrying out only two prevention activities per tour of duty.

We were encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since our last inspection. We were pleased to see that the service's arrangements for managing performance clearly link resource use to its CRMP and strategic priorities.

Performance measures are monitored and discussed at the quarterly performance assurance board. All fire stations have a Power BI dashboard that shows outputs aligned with the performance assurance framework. Data reporting systems have been developed to gather objectives, training, prevention and protection activity. Each station has a local risk management plan tailored to local risk profiles, which are reviewed annually. These plans include prevention and protection activities, training needs, cross-border exercises and other tasks.

The service understands how it uses its wholetime firefighters. It collects data on how they spend their time across day and night shifts. For example, it has collected data through a time and motion study under a Suffolk County Council programme called fit for the future.

We have seen an improvement in the amount of prevention activities carried out by wholetime firefighters.

The service collaborates well with other organisations

We were pleased to see the service meets its statutory duty to collaborate. It routinely considers opportunities to collaborate with other emergency responders.

Collaborative work is aligned to the priorities in the service's CRMP. For example, the service shares 17 of its 35 buildings with either Suffolk Constabulary or East of England Ambulance Service. It works with the local multiagency safeguarding hub so that safeguarding issues that have been identified during a home fire safety check or attendance at an incident can be reported.

The service collaborates with the National Farmers' Union to promote rural fire prevention, using the union's networks to reach rural communities. This partnership helps raise awareness of fire risks and improve fire safety practices in rural areas.

The service works with local partners including Port of Felixstowe Port, Adastral Park (a campus of telecommunication and technology companies), RAF Lakenheath, RAF Mildenhall, and Suffolk Lowland Search and Rescue. The partners carry out exercises to make sure that they can provide a safe and effective incident response when required.

We are satisfied that the service monitors, reviews and evaluates the benefits and results of its collaborations. This work has provided the evidence to support the service's withdrawal from its control room collaboration with Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service. It has helped the service to secure capital funding from Suffolk County Council for its new arrangements.

The service has good continuity arrangements in place

The service has good continuity arrangements in place for areas in which it considers threats and risks to be high. It regularly reviews and tests these threats and risks so that staff know the arrangements and their associated responsibilities.

The service has appropriate continuity plans in place for industrial action. It has assured itself and can demonstrate that it has adequate resources available for potential industrial action. The plans are detailed and comprehensive, and set out the service's planning assumptions. These include where fire engines will be located, actions to be taken during industrial action and the recovery phase, and the communication channels to be used with the workforce. It has tested these plans and used learning to update them.

Some savings made have affected operational performance

The service holds regular reviews to consider all its expenditure, including its non-pay costs. The process of continuously challenging its spending arrangements helps to make sure the service gets value for money. The service works closely with the county council's finance team through regular review meetings. Finance and performance data is also reported and scrutinised regularly by the county council's cabinet members. And the service's programme management board meets quarterly to review progress with the capital programme.

The service is taking steps to make sure that important areas, including estates, fleet and procurement, are well placed to achieve efficiency gains through sound financial management and best working practices. However, the service has made savings and efficiencies through changes to its IT strategy that have affected its operational performance and the service it provides to the public. The effects of this have been highlighted in this report.

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

Requires improvement

Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at making the service affordable now and in the future.

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

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure that its IT systems are resilient, reliable, accurate and accessible.

The service should make sure it has the right skills and capacity to successfully manage change across the organisation.

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

Main findings

The service's IT infrastructure is failing staff and holding the service back

During our 2019 inspection, we highlighted as an area for improvement that the service needed to make the best use of technology to improve its efficiency and effectiveness. During our 2022 inspection, we found that the service had secured an extra £100,000 from the county council to invest in future innovation and technology, capacity and capability. The service had put in place the capacity and capability needed to achieve sustainable transformation by recruiting a programme manager and additional business analysts.

However, we were disappointed to find the service had declined since our last inspection. Some staff can't work effectively or efficiently due to issues with some IT systems.

In this inspection, we found that the service had withdrawn its IT apprenticeship posts and was shifting from in-house software development to off-the-shelf and cloud-based software that was customer focused and more resilient. While the service has a clear information and technology roadmap, this will take time to implement. This has left the current service-critical systems unsupported, which is having a significant impact on the service, as detailed in this report. We were told staff weren't consulted on the service's decision to change its IT strategy, and that staff from an external organisation informed the senior leadership team of the risks and weren't listened to. This led to expert staff on the IT team leaving. The service hasn't yet recruited to fill these positions and has consequently lost the capability and capacity to maintain some of its IT systems. Due to its inaction on recruitment, the service has had to employ an external company to manage its systems and rectify issues, at an additional cost.

The service's premises management and training record systems were built in house and need to be maintained by developers. But the systems aren't being effectively maintained and are failing staff. We found inaccurate data, and a list of IT faults and issues that wasn't being effectively managed. For example, the automated link between the service's premises management system and Safelincs (an online tool for home fire safety checks) is failing, resulting in "broken jobs" that lead to some referrals being missed. Staff are frustrated and are using spreadsheets as a "workaround" to make sure they no longer miss home fire safety visit referrals. Across the service generally, staff don't trust the current IT systems and are creating their own data spreadsheets. The overreliance on spreadsheets presents a risk, with potential issues including data entry errors, lack of training and support, lack of automation, lack of version control and difficulty analysing the information.

The IT risks identified are known to the service but haven't been dealt with effectively. The governance, oversight and assurance processes in place aren't effective.

The service has a sound understanding of future financial challenges

As part of Suffolk County Council's fire and public safety directorate, the service has a sound understanding of future financial challenges. Suffolk County Council faces significant financial challenges over the medium term until 2027/28. The service has carried out scenario planning for possible future spending cuts, which has been validated by a third-party external company. These include assumptions for pay increases, inflation and funding changes. The underpinning assumptions are relatively robust, realistic and sensible, and take account of the wider external environment. These continue to be subject to informed challenges by the county council.

The service's 2024/25 budget includes £152,000 of identified savings. These savings include the relocation of fire and rescue service equipment and stores (£20,000); a reduction of the on-call recruitment budget (£50,000) where the service couldn't recruit; and the withdrawal of IT apprenticeship posts (£82,000). The service is working closely with the county council, through its fit for the future programme, to develop future saving plans. It also has plans to carry out a full fire cover and resourcing review in 2025.

The service has clear arrangements for the use of reserves

Reserves are held by Suffolk County Council. There is a robust process in place for the service to access them. Earmarked reserves are held for specific purposes, such as to support the service's transformation plans.

The service plans to use reserves of £549,000 in 2024/25, which will be allocated as follows: transformation reserves for prevention (£70,000); transformation reserves for fire governance (£125,000); fire private finance initiative project reserves (£351,000); and a fire and rescue service app (£3,000).

The fleet strategy is linked to the CRMP and financial plans

We were encouraged to see the improvements the service has made since our last inspection. The service's fleet strategy has clear links to its CRMP.

The service regularly reviews the strategy so it can assess the effect that any future innovation or changes in its fleet provision may have on risk. The strategy covers value for money and sets out controls, risk management, governance, and review and evaluation processes. It also covers environmental considerations and, where possible, the provision of technology and infrastructure to allow the decarbonisation of vehicles and equipment on replacement or as new technology is identified. As part of its 15-year programme to replace vehicles, the service has invested in electric vehicles, with 28 percent of the fleet now fully electric.

The service has a strategic asset management plan that details the provision and maintenance of fire stations and other properties within the responsibility of the service's property management function. However, the county council manages its estates strategy, and the service submits business cases to secure funding for capital projects.

The service generates some income

The service anticipates it will receive external income of £363,000 in 2024/25. The service will also be able to recover costs during the construction phase of Sizewell C. This funding will be released in instalments to Suffolk County Council and used by the service as required. It will be used to carry out on-site exercises, site visits and familiarisation for crews and officers, high-risk planning, and training and resilience measures.

Promoting the right values and culture

Inadequate

Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service is inadequate at promoting the right values and culture.

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

Cause of concern

Senior leaders aren't managing effectively; they are providing poor scrutiny and oversight and are disengaged from the issues raised by managers and the wider workforce. There is a lack of strategic focus on key people areas. We found numerous examples of senior leaders not acting as role models and not demonstrating the culture and behaviours of the service.

Recommendations

The service should develop an action plan to make sure:

- its internal governance arrangements are effective;
- its values and behaviours are demonstrated by staff at all levels of the organisation;
- senior leaders act as role models and show they are committed to the service's values through their behaviour;
- it improves communications between staff and senior leaders, so questions and feedback receive prompt and appropriate responses; and
- staff are confident in raising issues and concerns.

Areas for improvement

The service should proactively monitor working hours (including overtime) to improve staff well-being.

The service should make sure it has effective oversight, governance and training in place to proactively monitor and manage absence, particularly absence related to stress.

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

Main findings

Senior leaders need to act as role models and show that they are committed to the service's values through their behaviours

The service continues to have well-defined values, within Suffolk County Council's values and behaviour framework called WE ASPIRE, which staff understand. It has implemented the Fire Standards Board's [Core Code of Ethics](#) well, and staff understand it.

In our previous inspection, we highlighted seven areas for improvement within the people area of our inspection process. In recognition of this, the service employed a workforce and development manager, and appointed a head of people. And as part of the performance assurance framework, the service developed a people performance board.

However, during this inspection, we issued a cause of concern. We found that senior leaders weren't focusing on their staff. Not all senior leaders were acting as role models, and they were often disengaged from the issues raised by other managers and the wider workforce. Strategic managers had been focused on implementing the control project at the expense of staff.

We didn't find that the service had a positive working culture. The culture of the organisation doesn't always align with its values. Some behaviours we saw or were told about didn't meet the standards expected.

Many staff we spoke to felt that senior leaders didn't always act as positive role models. In our staff survey, 77 percent of respondents (116 out of 151) agreed that senior leaders consistently modelled and maintained the service's values.

Most staff we spoke with during our inspection were committed to the service's values. But some staff told us that morale was the lowest it had ever been. Teams had been reduced and fractured, and work had been redistributed to other teams, leaving staff worried about their jobs and each other's well-being. Some staff told us they were taking on more work for fear of otherwise being seen as dispensable.

We found examples of senior leaders being disinterested in issues raised by staff, and we heard several examples of leaders demonstrating poor behaviour towards staff, such as belittling staff; displaying dismissive, overbearing and defensive behaviours; and displaying behaviours perceived as hostile and toxic.

These behaviours can lead to lower levels of staff motivation and increased levels of physical and mental health problems.

We were also told of some instances of inappropriate behaviour within the wider workforce, with some wholetime staff making derogatory comments about on-call staff.

The service needs to do more to improve communications between staff and senior leaders, and increase staff confidence in providing feedback and challenging management

In our previous two inspections, we identified as an area for improvement that the service needed to do more to improve staff confidence in giving feedback and challenging management. During this inspection, we were surprised and disappointed to find that staff were less confident in providing feedback and challenging management than during our previous inspections. Therefore, this area for improvement will remain.

The service has clear processes in place to communicate to staff, gather their feedback and respond to their concerns. Senior leaders and managers carry out station and departmental visits, and the service has increased its use of staff bulletins and its mobile application for staff communications. It also has a staff engagement network, which staff can use to give feedback or suggest improvements on matters related to their work. The service has also made available a 'speak up' service that provides a way for staff to pass on information about wrongdoing to an independent, impartial team, who forward the information on to someone who can help.

However, we found examples of the senior leadership team arranging station visits but then cancelling them. We also found examples of the senior leadership team attending away days at fire stations during which none of the leaders interacted with station staff.

We were that told senior leaders didn't listen to feedback from the workforce and that staff feel senior leaders weren't open to challenge or criticism. Staff told us that when they did raise issues, senior leaders responded in a defensive manner.

Throughout this inspection, we found examples of staff raising concerns that senior leaders didn't acknowledge, escalate to a governance board or follow up. This leaves staff feeling as if they aren't listened to and means the service is missing opportunities to reduce risk and make improvements.

We were told about several examples of poor behaviour that staff had experienced when providing feedback to senior leaders, such as senior leaders telling middle managers to "shut up" when they spoke about being busy.

Staff also told us that they felt there was a disconnect between senior and middle managers and that information wasn't always filtered down to the workforce.

Worryingly, we found that there wasn't a strong culture of challenge, with staff not feeling empowered or willing to challenge poor behaviour when they came across it. For example, in our staff survey, 60 percent of respondents (99 out of 165) agreed that it was safe to challenge the way things were done in the service, while 66 percent (109 out of 165) agreed that they felt confident in the systems for providing feedback to staff at all levels.

Not all representative bodies feel that their opinions and views are listened to and valued by Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service's leaders, and industrial relations haven't improved over the last 12 months.

The service's approach to monitoring absence needs to improve

We found there are clear processes in place to manage absences for all staff. There is clear guidance for managers, who are confident in using the processes. The service manages absences well and in accordance with policy.

However, we found that the service hadn't been providing data collectors in the sector with absence data for three years. We therefore had to ask the service to provide an up-to-date data return that included reasons for absence. We were told that the HR data provided to the service was inaccurate and the occupational health department had to cleanse the information to effectively monitor the causes of workplace absence. Numerous staff raised concerns that absence due to stress was rising.

The data the service provided shows an increase in the number of days/shifts lost to sickness absence over the past two years, from 3,988 in the year ending 31 March 2022 to 7,065 in the year ending 31 March 2023. This had since decreased slightly to 6,517 days/shifts lost in the year ending 31 March 2024.

The number of days/shifts lost specifically due to stress, depression and anxiety nearly doubled between 2022 and 2024. In the year ending 31 March 2024, 1,034 days/shifts were lost due to these reasons, compared with 579 in 2022.

People data such as absence and staff demographics is reported through a quarterly performance assurance report to the fire authority through the fire and rescue service steering group and the county council's corporate and joint leadership teams.

However, we found that absence wasn't a service performance measure and wasn't being effectively monitored by the performance assurance governance board. Staff told us that they could only report on absence trends and recommend remedial actions if they were invited to speak at the performance assurance board's meetings.

The data provided by the service shows that absence due to stress, anxiety and depression is increasing across the service, and is disproportionately higher in support roles than in other areas. Some of this disproportionality is a result of workplace stress. The service needs to monitor this data so it can be addressed. We found it worrying that the service isn't already monitoring this.

The service should make sure it has effective oversight, governance and training in place to proactively monitor and manage absence, particularly absence related to stress.

Secondary employment isn't monitored effectively

In our previous two inspections, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should proactively monitor working hours (including overtime) to improve staff well-being. During this inspection, we were surprised and disappointed to find that little progress had been made in this area. Therefore, this area for improvement will remain.

The service has a policy that allows firefighters to hold secondary employment, with permission from the chief fire officer. Staff are informed that they should comply with relevant working time regulations and not work excessive hours, but we are unsure how effective this arrangement is.

The service hasn't been providing us with data on staff who have secondary external employment or dual contracts with other fire and rescue services. We found that the service didn't have a formal process or robust arrangements for line managers to monitor their staff's working hours.

Therefore, the service can't guarantee that its staff aren't working excessive hours. In our last inspection, we told the service that it should review this matter.

The service's approach to health and safety needs to improve

The service continues to have well-understood health and safety policies and procedures in place.

These policies and procedures are readily available, and the service promotes them effectively to all staff. In the staff survey from our latest inspection, the majority of respondents agreed they felt that the service had a clear procedure to report all accidents, [near misses](#) and dangerous occurrences. Both staff and representative bodies have confidence in the service's approach to health and safety.

However, we found that health and safety wasn't a service performance measure and wasn't monitored and reported on by the service's performance assurance board. Staff told us that they could only report on health and safety trends and recommend remedial actions if they were invited to speak at the performance assurance board's meetings.

We found examples of health and safety issues being raised with strategic leaders to be dealt with at a governance board level, but the issues weren't acknowledged, and no action was taken.

Staff have good access to services that support their mental and physical health

The service continues to have well-understood and effective well-being policies in place for staff. A significant range of well-being resources are available to support staff's physical and mental health, including:

- an employee assistance programme that is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week;
- a well-being team;
- mental health first-aiders;
- a chaplain;
- access to Blue Light Together, a mental health and well-being hub; and
- access to the Fire Fighters Charity.

There are good provisions in place to promote staff well-being, including access to resources from Suffolk County Council. Staff have access to programmes on:

- stress management;
- healthy conversations;
- suicide awareness;
- keeping well and working well;
- staying fit for action;
- being smoke free;
- financial health and well-being; and
- get the measure, a drink and drug awareness resource.

They also have access to Every Mind Matters, an NHS mental health programme.

In the staff survey from our latest inspection, 95 percent of respondents (157 out of 165) agreed that they were able to access services to support their mental well-being. Most staff reported that they understood and had confidence in the well-being support services available to them.

Getting the right people with the right skills

Requires improvement

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

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

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure it has an effective, accurate and accessible system to record and monitor the training and skills of its operational staff.

The service should make sure that its records for risk-critical competencies, such as operating breathing apparatus, driving fire engines and incident command, 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.

Main findings

The service's IT and establishment controls are affecting workforce and succession planning

In our previous inspections, we identified two areas for improvement. One, that the service should make sure its workforce plan took full account of the skills and capabilities necessary for carrying out its CRMP. And two, that the service should review its succession planning to make sure it had effective arrangements in place to manage staff turnover, while continuing to provide its core services to the public. There has been some progress, but the service needs to do more work in these areas.

Since our last inspection, the service has employed a workforce planning and development manager. They have put good workforce planning processes in place and hold monthly organisational workforce planning meetings. This makes sure that staff's skills and capabilities align with what the service needs to effectively carry out its CRMP. However, we were told that the workforce planning team didn't have a record of everyone's skills and the training record system "has pretty much ground to a halt".

The IT systems and the establishment controls of the service's parent authority, Suffolk County Council, are affecting workforce and succession planning. For example, the county council's HR IT system doesn't appear to be able to provide the fire and rescue service with the details of firefighters' contracts in order for the service to succession plan and pay on-call staff correctly. And the establishment controls are inhibiting the service's ability to properly manage its workforce vacancies. The service has plans to address this by investing in an off-the-shelf training record system, and Suffolk County Council is reviewing its establishment control process.

The service doesn't have effective, accurate and accessible systems in place to record and monitor the training and skills of its operational staff

Although there is a system in place to review workforce capabilities, it isn't effective, and there is a risk that staff may lack important skills now and in the future.

At a local level, the service understands which workforce skills and risk-critical safety capabilities are necessary to meet current and future organisational needs. The service's training record system is a computer software programme that was built in house and needs to be maintained and developed by developers. While the service has IT improvement plans, at the time of this inspection, it didn't have the capability or capacity to maintain the training record system. The system's automated functions are no longer active, and it is no longer effective. There is an alternative system in place to review workforce capabilities – skills are mapped on an Excel spreadsheet, which is updated by relevant managers. The information on this spreadsheet is then manually inputted into the service's new availability roster system. We were told that skills were then updated on the service's Power BI dashboard.

However, this process is inconsistently managed. We found inaccurate competencies recorded on the training record system and the new availability roster system. The systems don't raise alerts or flags when an officer's skills are about to expire or are already out of date. Staff told us that that "if it is not written down, it didn't happen".

The service can't assure itself that the people it deploys are appropriately trained

The service has introduced Power BI dashboards to monitor its staff's skills and competencies. However, due to a lack of effective IT support and the failing of the training record system, spreadsheets are extensively used to record information. This information then has to be manually inputted into the new availability roster system, which updates the dashboard.

There is limited corporate oversight of staff skills. Senior leaders aren't effectively monitoring staff's safety-critical skills. We found inaccurate recording of competencies on the new availability roster system, which had been raised as a safety issue with senior leaders but, disappointingly, wasn't acknowledged.

The service can't assure itself that the people being deployed are appropriately trained.

The service supports staff with a range of training opportunities

The service promotes a culture of continuous improvement throughout the organisation, and it encourages staff to learn and develop. For example, it keeps staff up to date on national, regional and local operational learning through its internal communication systems. It also makes use of apprenticeships and offers leadership and management courses.

In the staff survey from our latest inspection, 84 percent of respondents (139 out of 165) agreed that they had received sufficient training to effectively do their job.

Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity

Requires improvement

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

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

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure it provides the strategic commitment, direction and monitoring needed to fully integrate equality, diversity and inclusion policies throughout the organisation.

The service should make sure it has robust processes in place to carry out [equality impact assessments](#) and review any actions agreed as a result.

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

Main findings

EDI isn't a high enough priority for the service

In our previous inspection, we found the service's EDI strategy to be good. We also found that the service had a good race equality and equality action plan. However, we found that the service didn't have dedicated EDI staff and it was experiencing difficulty recruiting such staff.

In this inspection, we found that the service had now recruited an EDI officer. They provide updates on EDI to the service's people performance board and have had a positive impact on the organisation by encouraging staff to be interested in and discuss EDI.

But we found a lack of strategic focus on EDI. The service didn't have an up-to-date EDI strategy, or a working EDI action plan as required under Suffolk County Council's race equality action plan. We also found that senior leaders weren't making sure that equality impact assessments were being carried out.

The service's values, the Core Code of Ethics and EDI aren't standing items for discussion in the service's senior leadership boards. The service should consider including these, along with a more effective system for staff networks to provide feedback to the relevant governance board.

There are processes in place to identify and support neurodivergence. However, we found a lack of focus on [protected characteristics](#). We found that the service had completed an assessment (called the orange guide) of all working locations, but no formal plans had been made to immediately improve the accessibility and inclusivity of its estates. Accessibility and inclusivity improvements to the fire and rescue service's estates are absorbed into the county council's estates refurbishment programme. All the above represent barriers to the service diversifying its workforce.

The service's approach to equality impact assessments hasn't improved

In our previous inspection, we found that the service wasn't consistently applying its equality impact assessment process. During this inspection, we were surprised and disappointed to find that little progress had been made in this area. Therefore, this area for improvement will remain.

As part of our inspection, we reviewed a range of the service's policies and procedures. We assessed if they were up to date and had been through an equality impact assessment. We further requested a list of equality impact assessments that had been carried out over the previous 18 months.

Although the service has developed new processes in line with national best practice, disappointingly it has carried out minimal equality impact assessments. These are required to make sure that an organisation's policies, services and practices don't create barriers to participation or discriminate against anyone with protected characteristics, and that it complies with the [public sector equality duty](#). The service lacks effective internal strategic oversight to make sure that these assessments are carried out.

The service is good at tackling bullying, harassment and discrimination

Staff have a good understanding of what bullying, [harassment](#) and discrimination are, and their negative effects on colleagues and the organisation.

In this inspection, 13 percent of staff who responded to our survey (21 out of 165) told us they had been subject to bullying or harassment over the past 12 months, while 13 percent (21 out of 165) said they had been subject to discrimination.

In the year ending 31 March 2024, the service had 9 grievance cases and 17 discipline cases. One grievance case was for bullying and harassment, and two were for discriminatory behaviour. This is an increase on previous years. However, we found that these had been managed well and that staff representatives felt the service had appropriate processes in place and took appropriate action to eliminate bullying and harassment. Staff representatives told us in the survey that the service also had appropriate processes in place and took appropriate action to eliminate discrimination effectively.

However, not all staff we spoke to during this inspection felt empowered to challenge inappropriate behaviour, and we found several cases where staff didn't feel confident in challenging racist behaviour directly.

The service has improved workforce understanding of and its approach to positive action

In our previous two inspections, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should improve staff's understanding of [positive action](#) and the benefits of having a diverse workforce.

In recognition of this, the service provided additional EDI training through an external company, which included training on positive action. This was followed by the EDI officer carrying out station and team visits to gather feedback and explore staff understanding of positive action. During this inspection, we found that staff had a better understanding of what positive action was and its benefits.

The service has made good progress in this area, so we have closed this area for improvement.

The service needs to do more to improve the diversity of its workforce

The service has put considerable effort into developing its recruitment processes so that they are fair and potential applicants can understand them. It has introduced staff accreditation and [unconscious bias](#) training for hiring managers. It also has a more balanced interview panel that includes an HR representative from the county council. The service advertises recruitment opportunities internally and externally. Recruitment campaigns at all levels are directed at and accessible to under-represented groups. We identified recruitment campaigns advertised via social media platforms as well as the National Fire Chiefs Council, the [Asian Fire Service Association](#) and [Women in the Fire Service](#).

There is a good range of networks available to staff through the county council, including the following:

- Suffolk Women in Fire Together (SWIFT)
- D(d)eaf and hard of hearing network
- Black and Asian network
- carers network
- disABILITY staff network
- LGBTQ+ staff network
- women's health network
- neurodiversity network.

As at March 2023, 12.8 percent of the service's workforce identified as a woman, compared to 50.7 percent in the local population and an England average of 19.4 percent. This is an increase on the previous year, but this varies by role. People who identified as a woman made up:

- 6.7 percent of on-call firefighters;
- 9.7 percent of wholetime firefighters; and
- 39.1 percent of support staff.

The service needs to do more to increase staff diversity. It has made little progress to improve ethnic diversity. As at 31 March 2023, 3.7 percent of staff were from an ethnic minority background compared to 12.1 percent in the local population.

By role, workers from an ethnic minority background made up:

- 2.5 percent of on-call firefighters;
- 4.5 percent of wholetime firefighters; and
- 5.4 percent of support staff.

As at 31 March 2024, the proportion of staff from an ethnic minority background increased, but the proportion of firefighters decreased, so the service still needs to make more progress.

Managing performance and developing leaders

Adequate

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

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

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure that staff see promotion processes as transparent and fair.

The service should put in place open and fair processes to identify and support high-potential staff and aspiring leaders.

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

Main findings

The service's management of individuals' performance has improved

There is a good performance management system in place, which allows the service to effectively develop and assess the individual performance of all staff. For example, line managers discuss staff's individual performance, set personal and organisational objectives, assess training needs, and identify talent and suitability for promotion.

In our last two inspections, we found that a low percentage of staff had completed a performance development review. We were told this was because the service didn't take these reviews seriously. We were also told that the IT systems used for the reviews didn't allow data to be extrapolated, so the service couldn't use the data to inform its understanding of the organisation's needs. However, during this inspection, we were told that the performance development review completion rate for 2024/25 was nearly 100 percent. Some 88 percent of respondents to our staff survey (145 out of 165) had had a review in the last 12 months, and most staff reported that they had regular discussions with their manager, which they found useful.

Most staff feel confident in the performance and development arrangements in place. Some 72 percent of respondents to our staff survey (119 out of 165) agreed that they were able to access the right learning and development opportunities when they needed to.

The service needs to do more to improve staff confidence in the fairness of promotion and progression processes

In our previous two inspections, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should make sure that its processes for the selection, development and promotion of staff were open, transparent and fair. The service has made some progress in this area.

The service has put considerable effort into developing its promotion and progression processes so that they are fair and all staff can understand them. The processes we reviewed during this inspection were found to be open, fair and transparent. The promotion and progression policies are comprehensive and cover opportunities in all roles.

However, the number of staff who feel that the promotion and progression processes aren't fair remains high. In our staff survey, 47 percent of respondents (78 out of 165) agreed that the promotion process in the service was fair. This is similar to the staff survey in our previous inspection, where 45 percent of respondents (68 out of 150) agreed that the promotion process in the service was fair.

The service is making efforts to increase diversity in its leadership

The service knows it needs to go further to increase workforce diversity, especially in middle and senior management. It has put measures in place to address this, including hosting a women in leadership programme. The service has also registered interest in the National Fire Chiefs Council's [direct entry scheme](#). We are interested to see how these measures develop.

The service makes development programmes and apprenticeships available for its support staff, which can lead to opportunities within Suffolk County Council. However, to improve diversity in its leadership, it needs to make more opportunities available to middle managers and senior leaders.

The service needs to do more to identify and support high-potential staff and improve the opportunities available to them

In our previous inspection, we identified as an area for improvement that the service should put in place an open and fair process to identify, develop and support high-potential staff and aspiring leaders. The service has made some progress in this area.

The service has improved the processes it uses to identify high-potential staff. But more needs to be done to improve how it actively manages the career pathways of staff, including those with specialist skills and those with the potential to progress to leadership roles.

In our previous inspection, the service told us that it was planning to adopt the National Fire Chiefs Council's succession planning model. It has now done this and has integrated a managing talent grid into its performance development review process so managers can use it to identify talent.

However, the service's career progression guidance only defines development pathways for firefighters. The service should consider putting in place more formal arrangements to identify and manage the career pathways of its support staff to allow them to become senior leaders within the fire and rescue service.

