

Fire & Rescue Service 2023–25

Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service

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Changes to this round of inspection

We last inspected County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service in May 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 County Durham and Darlington 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 County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service has performed in 11 areas. We have made the following graded judgments:

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

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

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

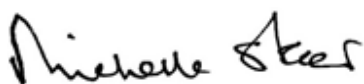
I congratulate County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service on its performance in keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks, but it needs to improve in some areas to provide a consistently good service. For example, it should improve how it promotes equality, diversity and inclusion, and how it works with under-represented groups in the community.

We were pleased to see that the service has made progress since our May 2022 inspection. For example, the service has improved how it carries out protection activities to manage compliance with fire safety legislation. It is evident that it has identified this aspect of service provision as a key area for improvement.

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

- The service is outstanding at protecting the public through fire regulation, and has adequate resources to meet the demand of its risk-based inspection programme (RBIP), which has been revised using national guidance.
- The service is good at preventing fires and other risks, and it carries out a high number of [home fire safety visits](#), giving priority to those most at risk in the community.
- The service has a dedicated continuous improvement team, which reports to the senior leadership team and has helped the service maintain grades of good in nine areas of assessment and outstanding in one, and also has a service improvement plan, approved by the combined [fire and rescue authority](#).

Overall, I commend the service on the changes it has made. I expect it to continue working to resolve the areas for improvement we have identified.



Michelle Skeer

HM Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Service in numbers



Profile

County Durham
and Darlington

England

Area	938	50,370
Square miles		
Population (thousands)	643	57,690
30 June 2023		
Population density	0.7	1.1
Thousands per square mile		



Cost

Funding	£33.1m	£2.5bn
Year ending 31 March 2023		
Expenditure per population	£53.86	£46.66
Year ending 31 March 2023		

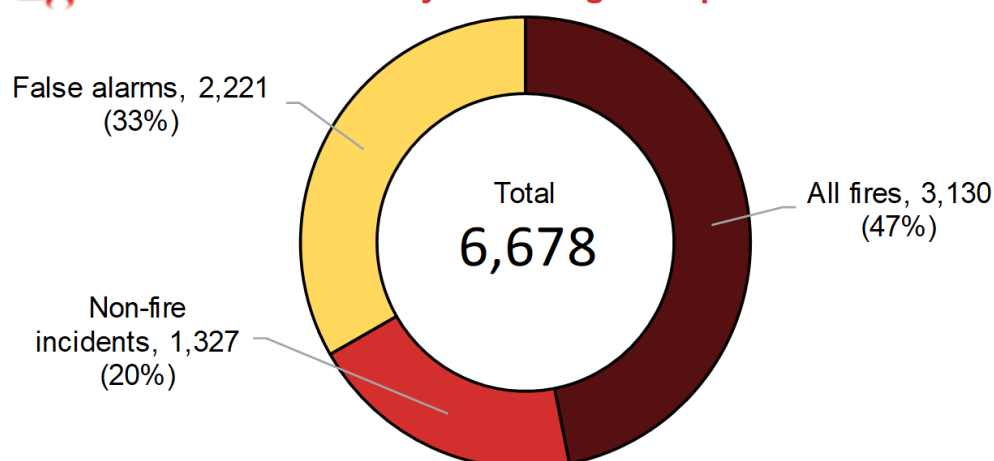


Response

Incidents attended per 1,000 population	10.4	10.4
Year ending 30 September 2024		
Home fire safety visits carried out by fire and rescue service per 1,000 population	28.6	9.8
Year ending 31 March 2024		
Fire safety audits per 100 known premises	9.7	2.0
Year ending 31 March 2024		
Availability of wholetime pumps	100.0%	
Year ending 31 March 2024		
Availability of on-call pumps	64.2%	
Year ending 31 March 2024		



Incidents attended in year ending 30 September 2024

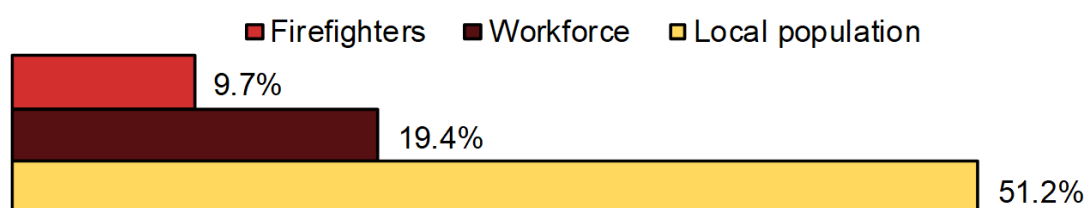


Workforce

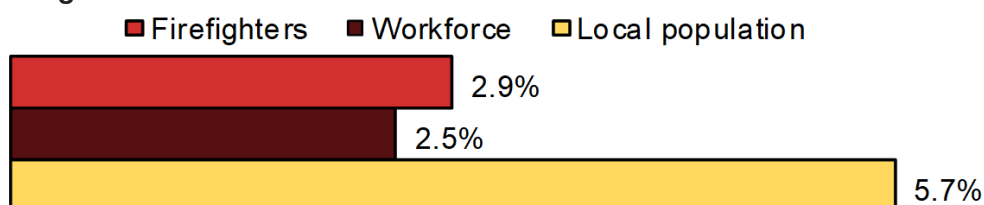
County Durham
and Darlington England

Five-year change in total workforce 2019 to 2024	5.9%	1.9%
Number of firefighters per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2024	0.76	0.60
Percentage of firefighters who are wholetime Year ending 31 March 2024	60.5%	65.8%

Percentage of firefighters, workforce and population who identified as a woman as at 31 March 2024



Percentage of firefighters, workforce and population who were from ethnic minority backgrounds as at 31 March 2024



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

Good

County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service is good at understanding risk.

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

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

Main findings

The service gathers an appropriate range of data and information to manage risk to the public

The service has assessed a suitable range of risks and threats using a thorough community risk management planning process. In its assessment of risk, it uses information it has collected from a broad range of internal and external sources and datasets. The service has created a community risk profile, which it reviews every year. It gathers information from the national risk register and the community risk register in collaboration with the [local resilience forum](#). It uses the information to identify the 20 highest risks.

When appropriate, the service has consulted and held constructive dialogue with some of its communities and other relevant parties to understand risk and explain how it intends to mitigate it. For example, it asks partners who are members of the local resilience forum, such as the police, ambulance service and county council, for their views on whether its assessments accurately reflect risk. The service consults with staff and members of the combined fire and rescue authority. It uses a range of methods to communicate with its community, such as information printed on paper and online information through a QR code.

But we found limited evidence of the service consulting directly with some [hard-to-reach](#) members of its community.

The community risk management plan is linked to staff activity

Once it has assessed risks, the service records its findings in an easily understood [community risk management plan \(CRMP\)](#) for 2024–27. 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, the service aligns fire station plans to the CRMP and uses ‘connect’ boards to provide firefighters with information about the risk in their local area and targets for the work they need to complete.

Staff appraisals are also linked to the CRMP. This helps staff understand how their personal aims and objectives and their performance contribute to the service’s priorities.

The service manages risk information effectively

The service routinely collects and updates the information it has about the highest-risk people, places and threats it has identified. This includes information gathered from the community risk register and the national risk register. It has also reviewed its process for managing risk information and has developed its own system. The service categorises risk from very low to very high and uses a performance dashboard to manage it. The service gathers risk information for commercial and industrial sites and homes where there are hazards such as stored medical oxygen.

We sampled a broad range of the risk information the service collects. This included information on properties with four floors or more that provide accommodation, industrial [COMAH sites](#) and properties that are derelict. These properties may present a risk to firefighters, the community and the environment if they are deliberately set on fire. We also sampled risk information for temporary events such as Durham Pride and the Durham County Show.

This information is readily available for the service’s protection and response staff. This means these teams can identify, reduce and mitigate risk effectively. For example, the service records information about changes to building construction, water supplies and deficiencies in fire safety management such as escape routes blocked with combustible materials. This may lead to inspection activity or changes to the response plans to make sure responses to emergency incidents are effective.

The service could improve how it shares information about changes to building plans and risk with prevention staff so that [safeguarding](#) or prevention activity can be prioritised.

Where appropriate, the service shares risk information with other services and agencies through the [Resilience Direct](#) platform. This is a portal for neighbouring fire and rescue services and others to access risk information in the event of an emergency. This helps fire and rescue services prepare for emergencies and promotes safe working practices.

Staff at the locations we visited, including firefighters and emergency control room staff, were able to show that they could access, use and share risk information quickly to help them resolve incidents safely.

In our 2021/22 inspection report, we issued the following area for improvement:

The service should ensure its firefighters have good access to relevant site-specific risk information.

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

The service reviews operational activity to improve understanding of risk

The service records and communicates risk information effectively. It also routinely updates risk assessments and uses feedback from local and national operational activities to inform its planning assumptions. For example, it has developed its marauding terrorist attack policy and procedures in accordance with national guidance.

Preventing fires and other risks

Good

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

Fire and rescue services must promote fire safety, including giving fire safety advice. To identify people at greatest risk from fire, services should work closely with other organisations in the public and voluntary 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's prevention strategy aligns activity to risk

The service's prevention strategy is clearly linked to the risks it has identified in its CRMP. The strategy covers a three-year period between 2023/24 and 2025/26. The service has adopted the [National Fire Chiefs Council's](#) national risk methodology. This helps it to make sure that at least 80 percent of all home fire safety visits are targeted towards members of the community who are at the greatest risk from fire.

The service recognises that there are more deliberate [primary](#) and secondary fires in north-east England than in other parts of the country. Its prevention strategy explains preventing these types of fires and accidental [dwelling fires](#) forms part of wider prevention activity.

The service's teams work well together and with other relevant organisations on prevention, and they share relevant information when needed. The service uses information to adjust its planning assumptions and direct activity between its prevention, protection and response functions.

The service prioritises its prevention activity to those most at risk

The service uses a risk-based approach to clearly prioritise its prevention activity towards people most at risk from fire and other emergencies. For example, it uses artificial intelligence (AI) to support risk categorisation. This has led to changes to the service model. Data analysis leads to a risk score that categorises a property as very high risk (priority 1) or high risk (priority 2).

The service uses a broad range of information and data to target its prevention activity towards [vulnerable](#) individuals and groups. This includes data to identify people who are vulnerable because of health, mobility, deprivation, lifestyle and age. After a fatal fire review process, the service is sourcing additional data on vulnerable people from Durham County Council. This is contributing to a change in how the service categorises vulnerability. The service is in consultation with other local authority partners to access similar data.

In 2023/24, 57.5 percent of its visits (10,585 out of 18,413) were to households with at least one vulnerable or at-risk person.

The service carries out a range of interventions, which it adapts to the level of risk in its communities. Operational crews carry out home fire safety visits for priority 1 and priority 2 properties. The service has dedicated community safety officers who will provide additional help and support when managing risk involves more complex needs.

Staff receive appropriate home fire safety visit training, but the service needs to continue raising staff awareness of the new risk categorisation process

Staff told us they have the right skills and confidence to make home fire safety visits. These visits cover an appropriate range of hazards that can put vulnerable people at greater risk from fire and other emergencies.

The service has provided staff with guidance and information about the revised process to prioritise risk in the community, and we found most staff could explain the various categories used. We recognise that, at the time of inspection, the service had recently amended the process to categorise risk, and some staff had limited awareness of the new methods. It is important that the service continues to develop staff knowledge and understanding in this area of work so that prevention activity is effective and meets the needs of the community.

Staff report safeguarding concerns and manage referrals effectively

Staff we interviewed told us about occasions when they had identified safeguarding problems. They told us they feel confident and trained to act appropriately and promptly. [Children](#) and adult safeguarding flow charts are available on fire engines and at fire stations for staff to use when completing a safeguarding referral. Firefighters provided examples of safeguarding referrals they had made, including referrals related to physical abuse, neglect, [domestic violence](#) and hoarding.

The service collaborates well with partner agencies

The service works with a wide range of other organisations to prevent fires and other emergencies. The service supports an initiative called Operation Trailblazer, which involves fire and rescue service staff and Durham Constabulary carrying out joint patrols in areas with increased levels of [antisocial behaviour](#) and criminal damage. During patrols they speak with local people about fire incidents. This helps to make sure prevention work is effective. The scheme is funded by the Home Office.

In Barnard Castle, the service and other emergency services partners, including Durham Constabulary, North East Ambulance Service and the local NHS foundation trust, hosted a road traffic collision awareness day. This promoted safety on the roads for young drivers, and about 100 students attended.

We found good evidence that the service routinely refers people at greatest risk to organisations that may better meet their needs. In 2023/24, it made 379 referrals to another agency, including to:

- Durham County Council, for slips, trips and falls referrals, winter warmth support and managing money better programmes;
- Alzheimer's Society, for dementia support; and
- County Durham Drug and Alcohol Recovery Services, for alcohol dependency treatment.

Arrangements are also in place for the service to receive referrals from other agencies. In 2023/24, the service made 1,162 visits as a result of these referrals.

It works with and provides training to other relevant agencies to support the Eyes Wide Open programme. This aims to increase direct referrals to the service about vulnerable people from partner agencies that can identify a risk from fire and other emergencies in the home. The service acts appropriately on the referrals it receives. For example, it prioritises home fire safety visits for people and properties that partner agencies have identified as vulnerable or at increased risk.

The service is actively tackling fire-setting behaviour

The service has a range of suitable and effective interventions to target and educate people with different needs who show signs of fire-setting behaviour. It has introduced a deliberate fire reduction model as a framework for operational crews to use when addressing and reducing deliberate fires. The model provides a structured process that helps identify the root causes of these fires, assess associated risk factors and implement targeted prevention measures. This helps crews to more effectively prioritise resources, tailor interventions to specific concerns and collaborate with partner agencies including Durham Constabulary when necessary.

When appropriate, the service routinely shares information with relevant organisations to support the prosecution of arsonists. The service has combined its community safety team and arson reduction team to improve its flexibility and capacity to tackle deliberate fires and arson. It also works in partnership with Durham Constabulary. The service has introduced the ISO/IEC 17020 inspection standard, which has improved the competencies of its fire investigators.

The service has improved how it evaluates prevention activity

The service has good evaluation tools in place to measure how effective its activity is and to make sure all sections of its communities get appropriate access to the prevention services that meet their needs. For example, as part of a peer review process, members of the community safety team observe firefighters when they complete a home fire safety visit. They provide feedback and guidance about the quality of the activity, recognise good practice and identify learning to support improvement. Supervisory managers also carry out random sampling of staff's prevention activity.

In our 2021/22 inspection report, we issued the following area for improvement:

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

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

The service could improve how it takes account of feedback from the public and other organisations about prevention activities. For example, staff told us that the prevention team used to telephone people who had received a home fire safety visit to evaluate the quality of the visit, but this no longer happened.

Overall, the service uses feedback to inform its planning assumptions and change future activity, so it focuses on what the community needs and what works.

Protecting the public through fire regulation

Outstanding

County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service is outstanding 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.

Promising practice

The service has established fire safety qualifications and competencies across a range of roles

The service makes sure firefighters, supervisory managers and specialist protection staff receive fire safety qualification training. This helps to make sure it has capacity and resilience in fire safety.

Staff who work in the protection team have or are working towards the Skills for Justice level 4 diploma in fire safety. Staff who are [watch](#)-based at fire station locations have completed the level 3 diploma in fire safety. Many firefighters who achieved their role competencies through an apprenticeship have completed the fire safety qualification. This means the service complies with the Competency Framework for Fire Safety Regulators.

Staff told us that they maintained their competence through a range of methods, including [continuing professional development](#). They also receive updates about legislation, building construction and service-specific case management.

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 CRMP sets its strategic direction

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, effectively exchanging information as needed. For example, a central team of protection inspection staff carries out fire safety audits at premises that present an increased risk, and operational crews complete audits at lower-risk premises. The teams work together to assure the quality of the inspection activity carried out, share information about changes in risk, and initiate enforcement action when necessary.

The service then uses information to adjust planning assumptions and direct activity between its protection, prevention and response functions. This means resources are properly aligned to risk. When applicable, the service changes the predetermined number of fire engines that will respond in the event of a fire at a property.

The service has an effective RBIP

The service's RBIP is focused on the service's highest-risk buildings. The service reviewed its RBIP and on 31 March 2024 introduced an updated programme. The revised RBIP has an increased focus on premises types identified as at higher risk, which were identified using national research. These include care homes, hotels, hospitals and residential buildings with four floors or more.

The audits we reviewed had been completed in the timescales the service has set itself. After it reviewed its RBIP, the service determined it would inspect 740 premises over a three-year period. The service reports that within the first year it has completed 300 inspections. It expects to complete inspections of all 740 premises within the three-year period.

The service is using Power BI reports to make sure it can inspect its high-risk premises within the required timescales. These reports highlight the number of audits carried out that found premises to be satisfactory or unsatisfactory.

The service completes fire safety audits to a good standard

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 RBIP;
- after fires at premises where fire safety legislation applies;
- after enforcement action had been taken; or
- at high-rise, high-risk buildings.

The audits we reviewed were completed to a high standard in a consistent, systematic way and in line with the service's policies. The service makes relevant information from its audits available to operational teams and control room operators. It has implemented a new automated notification process that makes sure firefighter risk information is shared internally with relevant staff. If a risk is identified during an inspection and logged under part A of the report, an automatic email alert is sent to relevant departments, including operational crews and control teams.

The service quality assures its protection work

The service carries out proportionate quality assurance of its protection activity. Inspection activity completed by level 3 qualified staff is reviewed by a member of staff with a higher level of competence, who examines the inspection outcomes and subsequent communication with the responsible person.

Colleagues who work in the central protection team complete peer reviews of each other's work. The team meets on a regular basis to discuss active cases and share findings, and to consider areas for improvement and recognise good practice.

The service has evaluation tools in place to measure how effective its activity is and to make sure all sections of its communities get appropriate access to the protection services that meet their needs. We reviewed audits that required enforcement action and that were subject to the methodology of the Enforcement Management Model. We didn't find records showing these audits had been formally reviewed by an appropriate level of management. The service is aware that an electronic signature confirming the approval of the Enforcement Management Model actions taken can't be added to the existing system, and it has introduced a new automated system to alert fire safety officers that a prohibition notice has been served. This is important to make sure that inspection outcomes don't vary in quality and consistency, particularly in complex cases requiring enforcement action.

The service uses enforcement powers proportionately

The service consistently uses its full range of enforcement powers, and when appropriate, it prosecutes those who don't comply with fire safety regulations. During our protection desktop file review, several cases showed the service had served prohibition notices to protect people from the risk of fire. The notices were proportionate and applied after other enforcement options had been exhausted. The service has a process for the duty senior manager to approve a prohibition notice in accordance with service policy.

In 2023/24, the service graded 759 properties it audited as unsatisfactory. As a result, the service issued no alteration notices, 686 informal notifications, 7 enforcement notices, 23 prohibition notices and carried out no prosecutions. It completed no prosecutions in the five years from 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2024. The service has taken action to prosecute on two occasions, which at the time of inspection were awaiting sentencing. As these two cases remain open, they aren't included in the numbers presented here.

The service aligns its protection resources to risk

The service has enough qualified protection staff to meet the requirements of its RBIP. The service defines competent protection staff as those who have attained a level 4 qualification in fire safety. As at 31 March 2024, it had six competent protection staff and one who was in training. The protection team is supplemented by watch-based staff who are qualified to level 3 and some to level 4. Although staff who are watch-based wouldn't normally complete fire safety work which has greater complexity, the service maintains the higher qualification through continuing professional development as it contributes to the resilience of the wider protection team.

The competence and skills the service has in the protection team and across other staff groups help it provide the range of audit and enforcement activity needed, both now and in the future. In 2023/24, the service carried out 9.7 audits per 100 known premises. The rate for England over the same period was 2.0.

The service has adapted to new legislation

Since our last inspection, the Building Safety Act 2022 and the Fire Safety (England) Regulations 2022 have been introduced to bring about better regulation and management of tall buildings.

The service is supporting the introduction of the [Building Safety Regulator](#). It expects these arrangements to have a limited impact on its other protection activity.

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

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

The service works well with partner agencies to support protection activity

The service works closely with other enforcement agencies to regulate fire safety and it routinely exchanges risk information with them. It also actively works with relevant regulatory bodies, including local authorities, [safety advisory groups](#), regional fire and rescue services, and policing teams dealing with [serious and organised crime](#).

An enforcement authorities activities group, chaired by the service, meets every three months. The group includes representatives from immigration, building control and environmental health. These agencies receive joint training and exchange intelligence regularly.

The ability to apply multi-agency enforcement powers enhances the service's effectiveness in tackling high-risk premises.

Furthermore, the service can access technical expertise from a level 5 fire engineer when necessary to support the management of complex premises.

The service has effective arrangements to respond to building consultations

The service responds to most building consultations on time. In 2023/24, the service responded to 98.9 percent of building regulation consultations (469 out of 474) and 99.0 percent of licensing consultations (201 out of 203) within the required timeframe. This means it consistently meets its statutory responsibility to comment on fire safety arrangements at new and altered buildings, and licensing consultations. It responds within 15 days of receipt and makes sure that fire safety concerns are addressed promptly during planning stages. It receives consultations electronically, which makes processing and record-keeping more efficient.

The service provides businesses with fire safety information

The service proactively works with local businesses and other organisations to promote compliance with fire safety legislation. The business fire safety team has held a fire safety seminar with local business professionals in association with the service's trading arm, Vital Fire Solutions (VFS). The session provided information about fire risk assessments, the responsible person, [the Regulatory Reform \(Fire Safety\) Order 2005](#) and evacuation planning. The service also has information on a range of fire safety-related matters on its website.

The service is working to reduce unwanted fire signals

An effective risk-based approach is in place to manage the number of unwanted fire signals. Protection officers assess all unwanted fire signals and write to responsible persons and building managers to help them improve, and warn of potential costs, where appropriate. If there are 3 false alarms within a 12-month period, the service issues a charge letter and carries out a site visit. Early work with responsible persons has led to positive behavioural changes, with some premises adapting systems to reduce false alarm activations. This is supplemented by call challenging within the emergency control function. The service won't respond to investigate automatic alarm activations at low to medium-risk premises between the hours of 8am and 6pm.

In the year to 31 March 2023, the proportion of automatic fire alarm activations that the service didn't attend was 20 percent. In the year to 31 March 2024, this increased to 55.4 percent. The rate of incidents attended per 1,000 population that are false alarms has reduced. In the year to 31 March 2023, the rate was 4.4, and in the year to 31 March 2024 it decreased to 3.7. This is also below the year to 31 March 2024 rate for England of 4.4.

Fewer unwanted fire signals mean fire engines are available to respond to a genuine incident rather than responding to a false one. It also reduces the risk to the public if fewer fire engines travel at high speed on the roads.

Responding to fires and other emergencies

Good

County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service is good at responding to fires and other emergencies.

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

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 arrangements are aligned to risk

The service's response strategy is linked to the risks it has identified in its CRMP. Its fire engines and response staff, as well as its working patterns, are designed and located to help the service respond flexibly to fires and other emergencies with the appropriate resources. For example, it has fire stations that are staffed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, as well as stations that have day-crewed, self-rostering and [on-call](#) duty systems. The demand profile for emergency incidents aligns to the different duty patterns. For example, fire stations where staff work through the day and night respond to the most incidents. Where there are fewer emergency incidents, the service adopts the on-call duty system to resource effectively.

The service meets the response standards it sets

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 states that it will attend 70 percent of dwelling fires within 8 minutes, 70 percent of non-domestic fires within 9 minutes, and 70 percent of road traffic collisions within 10 minutes.

In 2023/24, the service reported that it achieved its response standards for 69.1 percent of dwelling fires, 67.9 percent of non-domestic fires, and 69.8 percent of road traffic collisions.

Home Office data shows that in the year ending 31 March 2024, the service's response time to primary fires was 8 minutes and 48 seconds. This is faster than the average for predominantly rural services.

The service has a range of performance measures and methods to help it monitor its response to emergency incidents and assure this is as effective as possible. These include how soon it responds to emergency calls in its control room and how quickly resources are then sent to emergency incidents. The effective management of these calls means that firefighters are alerted and sent to emergency incidents as soon as possible. When there are delays in the emergency call-handling process, staff are required to provide information to help the service understand the reasons and implement improvements where necessary.

The service aims to [mobilise](#) a resource within 90 seconds of a call being answered by a [fire control](#) operator.

Fire engine availability is improving

The service doesn't state the optimum number of fire engines that it intends to have available at any time to support its response strategy. There are 15 fire stations and 26 fire engines in total across the service area.

In the year 2023/24, overall annual availability was 82.1 percent. For [wholetime](#) engines availability was 100 percent, and for on-call fire engines availability was 64.2 percent.

The service uses on-call liaison officers to improve the availability of fire engines. It has introduced several initiatives to help improve availability, such as providing some training courses at on-call fire stations. Staff who attend these training courses will also crew the fire engine at that location so that there is an available emergency response. In addition, specialist vehicles such as heavy rescue units and their crews and flexible duty officers, who respond to emergency incidents, will be moved to fire stations that are unavailable due to insufficient staff, to supplement the local crew and help fire engines to be available for emergency response.

The service reports these initiatives have helped to improve fire engine availability.

Staff can command emergency incidents effectively and safely

The service has trained incident commanders, who are assessed regularly and properly. They provide a range of command competence, from level 1 to level 4. There are also specialist roles to support effective command, including:

- national incident liaison officers;
- national control liaison officers;
- hazardous materials and environmental protection officers; and
- tactical advisers.

All staff in command roles are required to complete initial training courses, maintenance training and continuing professional development to support individual knowledge and understanding.

This helps the service safely, assertively and effectively manage the whole range of incidents it could face, from small and routine ones to complex multi-agency incidents.

As part of our inspection, we interviewed incident commanders from across the service. 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 emergency control function is improving

We were pleased to see the service's control staff were integrated into its training, exercise, debrief and assurance activity. But they aren't always included in its command functions. They have access to training materials and participate in exercises related to emergency incident response plans. Training periods are normally aligned to the night-duty period when the workload is less demanding. The service is aware that it may be able to improve the time available for training when it moves to a collaborative control function with three other services, which is in progress.

When the control room receives an emergency call, control staff start to manage the incident to make sure the service provides an effective response. They gather information and make decisions to meet the needs of the incident. These decisions are recorded within the control log function. But the service doesn't have a dedicated log in the control room to record more detailed information on these decisions and the supporting rationale in terms of command and management. This means there is limited analysis and evaluation of the command decisions being made in the emergency control room and also less opportunity to identify good practice, learn and improve.

Risk information is accurate and up to date

We sampled a range of site-specific risk information that the service refers to as operational risk information. This relates to commercial and industrial buildings that present a risk to the community, firefighters and the environment. It includes the information in place for firefighters responding to incidents at high-risk, high-rise buildings and the information held by fire control. The service also collates information for houses and homes, which it refers to as domestic operational risk information. This means that staff have access to a range of risk information that contributes to informed decision-making and an effective emergency response.

The information we reviewed was up to date and detailed. Staff could easily access and understand it. Encouragingly, it had been completed with information from the service's prevention, protection and response functions, when appropriate.

The service manages its operational performance well and follows national operational guidance

As part of the inspection, we reviewed a range of emergency incidents and training events. These include incidents that presented a risk to life or involved severe injury or death, and those that were complex or large scale, and training exercises that included a multi-agency response or cross-border services.

We were pleased to see the service routinely follows its policies to make sure that staff command incidents in line with [operational guidance](#). It updates internal risk information with the information it receives. Emergency response staff can access site-specific risk information using [mobile data terminals](#). Neighbouring fire and rescue services share information with the service. The service also exchanges information with appropriate organisations.

The service has responded to learning from incidents to improve its service for the public. For example, the service jointly responded with members of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency to an emergency incident that required a rescue from height. After the debrief process, the service carried out an exercise that recreated the incident. It filmed this exercise, and staff who had responded to the original incident provided the narrative. This helped the service share learning that may improve the effectiveness of any future response.

We were encouraged to see the service is contributing towards, and acting on, learning from other fire and rescue services and emergency service partners. In response to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry recommendations, the service now has a memorandum of understanding with Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service to manage additional calls when needed.

The service is good at sharing information about emergency incidents with the public

The service has good systems in place to inform the public about ongoing incidents and help keep them safe during and after incidents. This includes:

- arrangements for the emergency control team to share information about incidents through social media messaging;
- middle managers who are trained in media communication attending incidents or responding to specific enquiries from the press; and
- the communications team providing guidance and advice, creating media messaging and responding to requests and enquiries.

The service also forms a part of the communications group when managing emergency incidents with multi-agency partners, such as the police, ambulance service, public health, Environment Agency, county council, and community and volunteer groups, and the local resilience forum.

Responding to major and multi-agency incidents

Good

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

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

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

Main findings

The service has assessed the risk of major and multi-agency incidents

The service has effectively anticipated and considered the reasonably foreseeable risks and threats it may face. These risks are listed in both local and national risk registers as part of its community risk management planning. For example, flooding, adverse weather, wildfire and terrorism are all included in the local resilience forum risk summary and have been assessed by the service. It has the capabilities, specialist equipment and training to respond to each of the risks identified.

It is also familiar with the serious risks neighbouring fire and rescue services may face, and which it might reasonably be asked to respond to in an emergency. These include fires in tall buildings, high-risk industrial sites and locations where people gather at large-scale events. Firefighters have access to risk information from neighbouring services. The service holds information to support the effective response to emergency incidents, such as simultaneous evacuation plans for tall buildings that are in neighbouring service areas. Other partners that form part of response plans, including the police, ambulance service and county council, share information through the Resilience Direct platform.

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

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 have 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.

The service area doesn't have any buildings that are 18 metres or more in height. It has applied the same operating principles to buildings that are 11 metres or more (consisting of 4 floors or more).

We found the service has policies and procedures in place for safely managing this type of incident. Most staff understand them. The service has carried out training and exercises to test them. It has used vacant buildings in the service area to test its response and its evacuation of people from the property. It has also attended properties in neighbouring service areas that are categorised as tall buildings to provide crews with training and exercises to test the arrangements in place.

At this type of incident, a fire and rescue service would receive a high volume of simultaneous fire calls. We found that the systems in place in the service are robust enough to receive and manage this volume of calls. Staff in the emergency control room, at the incident and in assisting control rooms can share, view and update the actions that result from the individual fire calls.

Staff can work with other fire and rescue services effectively when needed

The service supports other fire and rescue services responding to emergency incidents, for example in responses to wide area flooding and wildfires. It is intraoperable with these services and can form part of a multi-agency response.

The service has successfully deployed to other services and has used national assets such as high-volume pumping equipment, water rescue teams and crews with a specialist wildfire capability.

Cross-border exercises form part of the service's preparations

The service has a cross-border exercise plan with neighbouring fire and rescue services, helping them work together effectively to keep the public safe. In 2023/24, the service completed 40.7 exercises per 1,000 full-time equivalent firefighters. The rate for England is 98.4.

The plan includes the risks of major events at which the service could foreseeably give support or ask for help from neighbouring services. We were encouraged to see the service uses feedback from these exercises to inform risk information and service plans. Firefighters have participated in multi-agency and cross-border exercises, including a major incident training scenario at Teesside International Airport. The service shares learning from these events through formal debriefs and also provides [organisational learning](#).

The service has integrated JESIP into its response arrangements

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

The service could give us strong evidence that it consistently follows these principles. This includes routinely applying the principles for joint working. The service applies the [M/ETHANE](#) mnemonic for messages it sends from major incidents to the emergency control room. This means firefighters know what information is needed to support a response in the initial phases of a major incident and all agencies receive consistent and relevant information.

We sampled a range of debriefs the service had carried out after multi-agency incidents and/or exercises. We were encouraged to find that the service is identifying any problems it has with applying JESIP and taking appropriate, prompt action with other emergency services. It has reviewed and improved the incident management room, which is next to the main emergency control room. These changes have been made to support the effective response to a major or multi-agency incident. In the event of a complex or large-scale incident that involves evacuating people and providing [fire survival guidance](#), flexible duty officers in the incident management room would provide additional command and control support.

The service works well with a range of partners in the local resilience forum

The service has good arrangements in place to respond to emergencies with partners that make up the County Durham and Darlington Local Resilience Forum. These arrangements include the local resilience forum secretariat team being directly employed by the fire and rescue service and located in its headquarters building. This contributes to effective communication. It also helps to support the planning and organising of all preparations for and responses to emergency incidents.

The service is a valued partner in the local resilience forum. The chief fire officer is the chair of the County Durham and Darlington Local Resilience Forum. Other officers chair and/or attend a range of groups, including the tactical business group and the training and exercises group. The service takes part in regular training events with other members of the local resilience forum and uses the learning to develop planning assumptions about responding to major and multi-agency incidents. It has participated in exercises to prepare for an accidental release of hazardous materials, a marauding terrorist attack and events affecting business continuity.

The service makes good use of national learning to inform its planning assumptions

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

Good

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

Fire and rescue services should manage their resources properly and appropriately, aligning them with 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 2025/26 is £36.6. This is a 3.2 percent increase from the previous financial year.

Innovative practice

The service uses a Microsoft Power BI application to record completed staff work tasks

The service's digital, data and technology team has developed an application (app) for its electronic devices to collect information that helps the service to understand and improve its productivity.

The app is already in use for firefighter roles and is now being introduced for other teams, such as emergency control room, protection and prevention teams. Staff enter details of the tasks they have completed during each duty period. The app analyses this information and can produce reports on the output of specific roles. The service is using this information to adjust work routines and increase productivity.

The app has been recognised nationally. The [National Fire Chiefs Council](#) has received grant funding for a sector-wide product to be developed that adopts the service's approach.

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 financial and station plans support its CRMP objectives

The service's financial and workforce plans, including allocating resources to prevention, protection and response, are consistent with the risks and priorities it has identified in its CRMP. Strategies are aligned to the CRMP and are clearly linked to fire station plans. Staff appraisals are part of the CRMP so that staff aims and objectives contribute to strategic priorities.

The service recognises the need to use all the resources available to improve efficiency. Specialist centrally located teams in prevention and protection are supplemented by station-based firefighters, which gives the service the capacity to carry out a higher number of related activities.

The service has evaluated its mix of crewing and duty systems. It has analysed its response cover and can show it deploys its fire engines and response staff to manage risk efficiently. The most recent fire cover review was completed in 2019. Since then, the service has reduced the number of firefighters who respond to emergency incidents from five to four. It has also evaluated the option to change how it deploys specialist vehicles and equipment.

The service's different duty systems make sure that operational personnel are available during times of peak demand and provide flexibility in work patterns to support staff well-being. The service has analysed how its resources are aligned to demand to make sure that it is efficient and effective. It is using its resources more intelligently, which has increased the availability of on-call duty system fire engines.

The service builds its plans on sound scenarios. They help make sure the service is sustainable and are underpinned by financial controls that reduce the risk of misusing public money. The fire and rescue authority oversees and scrutinises the service's budget performance to make sure it uses public money appropriately.

The service is improving its productivity and developing new ways of working

We were pleased to see that the service's arrangements for managing performance clearly link resource use to its CRMP and its strategic priorities. It has a range of performance indicators to help managers and leaders understand the progress being made against targets and objectives.

The service uses the Microsoft Power BI platform as part of its performance management system to monitor targets and manage performance. It can present information in the form of dashboards. Staff across the service access this data to inform decisions and set work priorities.

The service understands how it uses its wholetime firefighters. It collects data on how they spend their time across day and night shifts. It makes the most of its capacity. For example, in 2023 it started development of a Power BI app to measure and analyse the productivity of firefighters across all aspects of their work. This has led to improvements to work routines and increased productivity, and helped the service to make sure the workforce's time is as productive as possible.

The service has shared this information with the fire and rescue sector through the National Fire Chiefs Council's 2024 Data, Digital and Technology Conference and the Home Office's fire productivity and efficiency forum. The National Fire Chiefs Council has received a Home Office grant of £100,000 to develop the app into a sector-wide product.

The service is now using AI to direct firefighters' daily activities and provide guidance about their daily work routine so they can be as efficient as possible. Supervisory managers who plan, organise and manage day-to-day activities for their watch receive AI-generated proposals for activity, including prioritising of home fire safety visits, training to maintain competencies, and tasks to support the gathering and recording of risk information.

The use of AI in this area of work is at an early stage. The service recognises the need to develop how this helps improve efficiency and effectiveness, and that it needs to build staff confidence in this new way of working.

The service takes part in a range of collaboration initiatives

We were pleased to see the service meets its statutory duty to collaborate. It routinely considers opportunities to collaborate with other emergency responders. It shares buildings and facilities with Durham Constabulary, the Northeast Ambulance Service and mountain rescue teams.

Collaborative work is aligned to the priorities in the service's CRMP. For example, there is an active project to create an integrated control room with Cleveland Fire Brigade, Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service, and Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service. This will provide additional resilience in terms of people, equipment and systems. The service reports that the expected efficiency saving is £1.9 million over the 7 years of the contract.

The service also employs two community safety responders, who have dual roles as on-call firefighters and police community support officers. They work with other emergency services in rural communities and respond to emergency incidents.

We are satisfied that the service monitors, reviews and evaluates the benefits and results of its collaborations.

The chief fire officer, the chair of the fire and rescue authority, the chief constable of Durham Constabulary and the [police and crime commissioner](#) attend a formal collaboration board meeting. The service also maintains a collaboration register which is evaluated regularly. It makes sure all collaborations have a business case approved by the senior leadership team.

The service reviews and tests its continuity arrangements for areas of high threat and risk

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. It has developed business continuity arrangements for many areas of service provision, including periods of high demand and industrial action.

It offers all its staff the opportunity to develop their skills, knowledge and understanding to support emergency responses. The skills are tiered and include emergency control operation, defensive and offensive firefighting, and incident command.

The service provides staff with an annual payment to provide contingency emergency response cover, which means it has contracted arrangements to maintain an effective emergency response during industrial action or adverse events such as severe weather or large-scale incidents. This supports the service's resilience and helps it maintain a capability to respond to foreseeable risks such as widespread flooding and large-scale wildfire incidents.

The service manages its finances well and regularly reviews expenditure

There are regular reviews to consider all the service's expenditure, including its non-pay costs. And this scrutiny makes sure the service gets value for money. For-example, in February 2025, the service published the report of an external audit that evaluated the service's ability to demonstrate value for money. The audit found no significant weaknesses, and the auditor made no recommendations.

The service has made savings and efficiencies, which haven't affected its operational performance and the service it gives the public. In July 2023, it changed the crewing of wholetime fire engines from five firefighters to four. The service reports that this resulted in a saving of £900,000. It carried out an evaluation of this change and found its response to emergency incidents had no negative impact on the community.

The service is taking steps to make sure it achieves efficiency gains through sound financial management and best working practices. It is doing this in important areas such as estates, fleet and procurement. The service plans to move its headquarters to improve efficiency and achieve savings. It has completed a cost-benefit analysis of the location options (these were its existing location, a leased premises or building new premises at a new site). The service can demonstrate a full cost breakdown of the relocation, which will contribute to it achieving non-pay-related savings.

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

Good

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

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

Innovative practice

The service is using artificial intelligence to support a range of functions

The service is using artificial intelligence technology to help analyse its data and support well-informed decisions, including for risk profiling and proposing work plans for [watch](#)-based crews to improve productivity.

The service has used artificial intelligence to develop its risk-based inspection programme for auditing fire safety management in buildings (places) and categorising [vulnerability in the community](#) (people). It is improving the accuracy of risk assessments, helping to prioritise workloads so they align with the needs of the community and reducing the likelihood of fire and other emergencies. This improves community safety.

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 identifies and analyses potential and planned changes to its finances

The service has a sound understanding of future financial challenges. It plans to mitigate its main financial risks. For example, it has some contingency funds available in the revenue budget that it can use to cover unforeseen inflation. And the service told us it has a £1 million resilience reserve to cover additional costs during any period of industrial action.

The underpinning assumptions are relatively robust, realistic and sensible. They take account of the wider external environment and some scenario planning for future spending reductions. These include funding and pay inflation.

The service has set a balanced revenue budget for 2025/26. In its latest medium-term financial plan, it anticipates a revenue budget deficit of £1.1 million in 2026/27. It has developed some costed options for making future savings. When it moves out of its current headquarters location, it anticipates its operating costs will reduce by around £500,000.

We were pleased to see that the service has identified savings and investment opportunities to improve the service to the public or generate further savings. It has identified a list of 12 options, which it has assessed in terms of organisational impact. It has implemented four of the options. The other eight options range from changes to the crewing of specialist response vehicles to closing fire stations. It has listed these options in an order that starts with those with the least impact on the service it provides to the community.

The service's use of reserves is well structured and managed

The service has a sensible and sustainable plan for using its reserves. As set out in its latest reserves strategy for the year ending 31 March 2025, it holds a general reserve of £1.8 million, representing 5 percent of its annual revenue budget. And it has set eight categories of earmarked reserves:

- pensions
- insurance
- resilience
- strategic finance
- Emergency Services Mobile Communications Programme (unspent grant funding)
- modernisation
- community safety
- training.

The service's CRMP effectively directs its fleet and estates priorities and objectives

The service's estate and fleet strategies have clear links to its CRMP. The service has invested in its premises, vehicles and equipment to make sure that they reflect a modern standard and are fit for purpose. It has reviewed fire stations to manage the risk from contaminants.

It has also reviewed its vehicle maintenance, which has resulted in efficiency savings. The fleet and equipment department now carries out light vehicle tyre-fitting and repairs.

Both strategies exploit opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness. The service is improving fire stations to meet the needs of all staff, and evaluating locations that haven't yet been improved to determine how to bring them up to modern standards. All costs are included in the medium-term financial plan and managed to make sure staff facilities are fit for purpose and support an effective emergency response.

The service has introduced electric vehicles into its fleet. These vehicles are available to flexible duty officers who respond to emergency incidents. It selected fully electric vehicles after carrying out research to establish if their batteries would be reliable for a continuous duty period. The service has charging points available at various locations across the service area.

The service regularly reviews these strategies so that it can properly assess the effect any changes in estate and fleet provision, or future innovation, have on risk.

The service is aware of future risks and is adapting

The service actively considers how changes in technology and future innovation may affect risk. It monitors the external environment and its own incident data to develop an understanding of emerging risks. The service has identified power sources (non-conventional, such as lithium-ion batteries), disruption due to cyber events and severe weather events as risks.

It also tries to exploit opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness presented by changes in technology. The service has introduced an 'invest to save' initiative. It has installed several photovoltaic solar panel schemes. The service expects to achieve a full return on its investment within about six years. It is also adopting AI to analyse data, inform decisions and develop strategic directives. For example, it has used AI to develop its RBIP and to categorise people's level of risk of fire and other emergencies.

The service has put in place the capacity and capability it needs to achieve sustainable transformation, and it routinely looks for opportunities to work with others to improve efficiency and provide better services in the future. It has a digital, data and technology function that provides a managed service, including information, communication and technology support to staff. This helps the service to adapt to changes in the sector. The data centre is being replaced, and an external provider will now host the service's computer servers. The service will no longer have the capital costs, only the revenue costs for the provided service.

The service has initiatives to generate income

The service actively considers and exploits opportunities for generating extra income. It operates a trading arm company called VFS, which is owned by the fire and rescue authority and is limited by shares. The service reports that VFS has a turnover of nearly £1 million, which contributes to the service's revenue budget. VFS has secured long-term contracts with several major companies to provide training.

VFS provides its services, principally training, to external customers in the sector. The company's objectives include identifying new opportunities and continuing to grow the business.

The service has well-established controls in place to safeguard against conflict of interest. VFS has a board consisting of three members of the fire and rescue authority and three members of the service's leadership team. The board, shareholders and staff are clear on their roles and responsibilities. Governance arrangements are satisfactory, with the board and/or shareholders providing strategic direction and purpose. Its performance is subject to annual reviews, which allows the fiduciary duty to obtain value for money and comply with legislation to be satisfied. It contracts self-employed individuals or uses service staff whose time is recharged to VFS.

The service also charges organisations when they repeatedly fail to manage false alarm activations in their premises.

Where appropriate, it has secured external funding to invest in improvements to the service it gives the public. It has received funding to support its apprenticeship programmes and has an average income of £250,000 per annum to support its training budget.

Promoting the right values and culture

Good

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

Fire and rescue services should have positive and inclusive cultures, modelled by the behaviours of their senior leaders. 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.

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 promotes a positive culture, but it could improve the support for some staff

The service has well-defined values, which staff understand. We found staff at all levels of the service showing behaviours that reflect service values. It has created its own values, which are known as the PIE values:

- professional
- innovative
- effective.

The service uses a 4Cs model to support the PIE values:

- how staff approach challenges;
- how staff conduct themselves;
- how staff collaborate with others; and
- how staff promote change across the service to make a difference.

Senior leaders act as role models. For example, they use a range of methods to communicate with staff across the service. These include workplace visits, informal conversations with staff which are broad and not limited to work activity, team briefings and virtual 'chat with chief' sessions.

This gives staff diverse ways of interacting with senior leaders. Staff told us that leaders at all levels consistently demonstrated a commitment to the service's values and behaviours. They are visible, professional and open.

The service also holds leadership forums twice a year, which those at supervisory manager level and above attend. These events provide staff with organisational updates, insights into foreseeable challenges, and information on the service's strategic direction. They also contribute to continuing professional development, for example by providing information about fire safety legislation.

There is a positive working culture throughout the service, with most staff empowered and willing to challenge poor behaviours when they come across them. Managers at all levels are aware of the service's procedures to manage poor behaviour and conduct, including informal and formal routes. Managers are supported by the human resources department, which provides guidance and help to make sure there is a consistent and proportionate approach.

Staff also told us that they were confident to discuss issues with colleagues when they didn't show expected values and behaviours.

However, not all staff feel that there is a positive culture in their workplace. Members of the emergency control room team explained that their workload was challenging, which was compounded by limited resources. They have concerns about confidentiality and that policy and procedures aren't always applied or complied with.

The service is aware of the control team's concerns and has taken action to address them. For example, it is employing more staff in the control room team and promoting health and well-being initiatives. But some staff still feel that they aren't listened to and aren't confident to raise issues formally.

The service has a range of options to support staff well-being

The service has well-understood and effective well-being policies in place, which are available to staff. A good range of well-being support is available to support both physical and mental health. For example, employees can access occupational health support, which includes a health promotion programme, confidential counselling, and advice on personal fitness and medical conditions through the service's health and fitness adviser.

The service has an employee assistance programme. It has also started a trial of a private healthcare scheme for employees and their immediate family members.

There are good provisions in place to promote staff well-being. This includes all staff having access to fitness equipment to develop their personal health. Regular well-being messaging from the service further reinforces this culture. When staff respond to critical and significant emergency incidents, they can access support such as therapy for anxiety. The service also has mental health first aiders to provide quick and informed support.

All staff reported they understand and have confidence in the well-being support processes available. In our staff survey, 94 percent of respondents (128 out of 136) agreed that they felt able to access services to support their mental well-being.

The service has a proactive approach to health and safety

The service continues to have effective and well-understood health and safety policies and procedures in place. Staff at all levels receive mandatory training about health and safety, and managers have additional training relevant to their role level.

Workplaces have been surveyed and items such as lighting, equipment used for training, chairs and desks have been marked with specific identification labels. These assets are inspected daily, and defects are reported through an electronic system. Equipment has QR codes that can be scanned and allow information to be submitted. This promotes ease of use and encourages a positive culture for health and safety. We found records of completed testing consistently aligned with the service's policies and procedures.

These policies and procedures are readily available and the service promotes them effectively to all staff. Staff can access information through the service's intranet. They know about the service's system for reporting accidents, [near misses](#) and dangerous occurrences.

Both staff and representative bodies have confidence in the health and safety approach the service takes. In our staff survey, 99 percent of respondents (135 out of 136) stated that the service had clear procedures to report all accidents, near misses and dangerous occurrences, and 96 percent of respondents (130 out of 136) said that they were encouraged to report them.

Despite an established process for recording and raising awareness of incidents, the service's strategic reports show there is a consistent delay in investigations being completed. A strategic performance report highlights that from April to November 2024, several health and safety investigations were overdue. Staff told us that the 28-day timeframe for completing investigations wasn't always realistic. This may limit the service's ability to promptly record learning and implement necessary changes.

The service monitors staff who have secondary employment or dual contracts

As at 31 March 2024, 21.6 percent of firefighters had dual contracts within the service.

Staff and managers at all levels are aware of the service's process for making sure staff comply with the secondary employment policy and don't work excessive hours. This includes the requirement for staff to declare and request approval to hold a dual contract and that working time is recorded on a service system for managers to monitor. This arrangement is limited to roles that are within County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service only.

The service reviews dual contracts annually, with the human resources team managing the policy and approval process. QR codes at fire stations link to a checklist for making sure staff meet rest requirements, such as 11-hour non-working intervals.

The service manages staff absence effectively

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 process. The service manages absences well and in accordance with policy. Staff understand the service's absence management processes, including sickness triggers, reporting expectations and the availability of occupational health and welfare checks. They are confident that they will receive appropriate physical and mental health support when required, and are aware of formal procedures and available services.

In 2023/24, the average number of days not worked per firefighter due to short-term sickness decreased by 38.4 percent compared to the previous year. And the average number of days not worked per firefighter due to long-term sickness increased by 26.8 percent compared to the previous year.

Getting the right people with the right skills

Good

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

Fire and rescue services should have a workforce plan in place that is linked to their [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.

Promising practice

The service has effective workforce plans across all its functions

The service has well-established workforce and succession plans that improve its organisational resilience in terms of people, key skills, knowledge and understanding.

The workforce plan, which is reviewed by the service's leadership team, is linked to its [community risk management plan](#). It takes account of any new or emerging risks, including retaining people across staff groups. The service carries out an annual risk assessment to evaluate potential vacancies, their strategic impact and the challenges of recruiting staff with the required skills.

All the service's functions contribute to a 24-month plan, which reviews skills, maintenance of competence, new legislation and national guidance. This helps the service to be resilient and maintain the required level of skills, knowledge and understanding for all areas of service provision.

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 workforce planning helps maintain key skills and competence

The service has good workforce planning in place. This makes sure skills and capabilities align with what it needs to effectively carry out its CRMP. For example, it reviews the workforce plan monthly. A training needs analysis for operational and non-operational staff is linked to skills and capabilities. This supports succession planning for a period of five years ahead.

Workforce and succession planning is subject to consistent scrutiny in the form of regular meetings to discuss requirements. The senior leadership team approves plans and allocates funding. The service monitors single points of failure. It holds promotion processes every year for all levels to create a talent pool and cover short-term gaps such as secondments to other organisations.

The service manages and quality assures its workforce skills and capabilities well

Most staff told us that they could access the training they need to be effective in their role, including management skills. In our staff survey, 93 percent of respondents (126 out of 136) agreed that they have received sufficient training to effectively do their job.

The service's training plans make sure staff can maintain their competence and capability effectively. For example, training is aligned with the CRMP. The training programme provides the risk-critical training all personnel need, including broader role-specific training.

The service monitors staff competence through line-manager reviews of competency records, which are available through an electronic recording system. Information is also shared through the Power BI platform.

The service's training centre carries out quality assurance of operational crews' performance. Staff are required to demonstrate their level of knowledge and skills against risk-critical competencies and operational themes. The operational assurance group also carries out random sampling of compliance with training subjects and monitors any adverse trends in performance.

The service regularly updates its understanding of staff skills and risk-critical safety capabilities. A training needs analysis makes sure the service meets its statutory requirements. The competency recording system helps to keep firefighters within reassessment dates for risk-critical training. After assessments, supervisory managers proactively review outcomes and arrange refresher training where necessary. This cyclical monitoring and review process helps to maintain individual competencies and address any skills gaps, contributing to quality assurance of operational readiness.

This approach means the service can identify gaps in workforce capabilities and resilience. It also means it can make sound and financially sustainable decisions about current and future needs.

Staff have a range of opportunities to support learning and improvement

The service promotes a culture of continuous improvements throughout the organisation, and it encourages staff to learn and develop. For example, staff have access to funded additional training, internal secondments, and apprenticeships and degree programmes. Staff development needs are recorded through appraisals. We found positive examples of learning across departments and recognition that training supported both personal growth and career progression. We were pleased to see that the service has a range of resources in place.

Most staff told us they can access a range of learning and development resources. In our staff survey, 90 percent of respondents (123 out of 136) agreed that they could access the right learning and development opportunities. These include formal courses to acquire skills, knowledge and understanding, e-learning to maintain knowledge and competence, and continuing professional development across a range of subjects that is often aligned to subject matter expertise. This supports them to do their job effectively.

Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity

Adequate

County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service is adequate 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. 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 has robust processes in place to carry out [equality impact assessments](#) and review any actions agreed as a result.

The service should make sure all staff understand the benefits of equality, diversity and inclusion and their role in promoting these values.

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 encourages staff to provide feedback and raise concerns

The service has developed several ways to work with staff on issues and decisions that affect them. These include methods to build all-staff awareness of fairness and diversity, as well as targeted initiatives to identify matters that affect different staff groups. In April 2023, it introduced an independent reporting line, and it uses an internal survey named 'Call it Out'. This provides staff with an opportunity to share their experiences of working in the service and the wider sector. The service has discussed the survey findings with staff in focus groups. This has helped improve its policies, procedures and processes for making complaints and raising concerns.

The service has taken action to address matters staff have raised. Staff described a significant cultural shift led by new senior leaders, which has created a safe and supportive space to raise concerns. Most staff are aware of anonymous reporting systems such as Safecall, which the service promotes through screensavers and internal channels. Staff have received these actions positively.

Representative bodies and staff associations reported that the service works with them well. All the respondents to our local representative body survey agreed or tended to agree that senior leaders ask for feedback from them on behalf of their members.

Although the service has some means of gathering staff feedback, they aren't consistent or wide-ranging.

The service sets a three-month time limit for grievances to be submitted, which reflects the National Joint Council for Local Authorities '[Fire and Rescue Services Scheme of conditions of service](#)' (also known as the grey book). In cases involving a number of linked grievances, the three-month limit is based on the most recent issue. There is some flexibility, but it isn't clear where that flexibility applies and how this is communicated to staff.

Acas guidance states that there is no time limit on raising a grievance, although delays in reporting may affect any subsequent investigation.

The service has sufficient arrangements to tackle bullying, harassment and discrimination in the workforce

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

In our staff survey, 8 percent of respondents (11 out of 136) told us they had felt bullied or harassed and 9 percent of respondents (11 out of 136) told us they had felt discriminated against in the last 12 months.

Most staff are confident in the service's approach to tackling bullying, harassment and discrimination, grievances and disciplinary matters. The service has a variety of ways in which an individual can raise a concern, including through trade unions and staff representatives. The human resources team has regular meetings and conversations with staff representatives about concerns. There are also independent reporting and whistleblowing lines. Staff have access to relevant policies and procedures, such as fairness at work and dignity at work policies.

The service has guidance for staff about the options for raising a concern. Human resources department staff often work at fire stations and can help individual staff members with raising concerns.

Network groups often raise concerns on behalf of their members, and the service's leadership team will listen to these concerns and provide support.

The service has made sure all staff are trained and clear about what to do if they encounter inappropriate behaviour.

The service produces annual reports to address disproportionality in recruitment

There is an open, fair and honest recruitment process for staff or those wishing to work for the fire and rescue service. The service has an effective system to understand and remove the risk of [disproportionality](#) in recruitment processes. For example, it produces annual reports with information and data about equality, diversity and inclusion within the service. These reports are submitted to the human resources committee, equality, diversity and inclusion committee, and the senior leadership team working group. This helps the service to develop action plans and identify areas to focus on, such as increasing the number of women in different staff roles.

We found some evidence of recruitment campaigns being directed at or accessible to under-represented groups. The service isn't leading change in this area to increase the diversity of its workforce. For example, the recruitment campaigns we reviewed were only advertised internally through service bulletins and externally on North East Jobs and through social media platforms. The service isn't actively using platforms such as those of Women in the Fire Service UK or the Asian Fire Service Association to extend its reach when recruiting.

The service needs to do more to increase staff diversity. There has been little progress to improve ethnic and gender diversity.

In 2023/24, the proportion of wholetime firefighters who identified as being from an ethnic minority background remained at 2.4 percent (7 people). The proportion of on-call firefighters who identified as being from an ethnic minority background increased from 3.3 percent (5 people) in 2022/23 to 3.7 percent (6 people) in 2023/24.

The proportion of firefighters who identified as a woman has increased from 9.3 percent to 9.7 percent over the same period. In 2023/24, there were 47 firefighters who identified as a woman. In 2022/23, there were 44.

In 2023/24, for the whole workforce, 2.5 percent identified as being from an ethnic minority background compared to 5.7 percent in their local population and 8.6 percent throughout all fire and rescue services. And 19.4 percent identified as a woman, compared to an average of 20.2 percent throughout all fire and rescue services.

The service is developing how it assures equality, diversity and inclusion but could do more

The service is working with a community interest company to support inclusive recruitment as well as to provide training, guidance and advice to staff about equality, diversity and inclusion. It has developed a reasonable adjustment passport for staff. This helps managers to understand and implement support a staff member needs. The service also provides additional support for staff with neurodivergent conditions and has trained workplace assessors to determine what level of support can be offered.

But the service needs to improve its approach to equality, diversity and inclusion. When asked how they would describe the diversity of their team, many staff only mentioned gender. No one gave examples or evidence of wider diversity or mentioned other [protected characteristics](#). Staff weren't able to explain the benefits of diversity and how it contributes to making communities safer.

Although the service has a process in place to assess equality impact, it doesn't properly assess or act on the impact on each protected characteristic. All policies, procedures and guidance are subject to an equality impact assessment, which involves a screening phase and full assessment. The service's equality, diversity and inclusion policy states that where impacts are identified at the screening phase, a full assessment must be completed. In our review of the service's policies, we found that this wasn't consistently applied.

In addition, the service doesn't use the findings of these equality impact assessments to make changes to policies or procedures so that they are inclusive.

Managing performance and developing leaders

Good

County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service is good at managing performance and developing leaders.

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

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

Main findings

The service manages individual staff members' performance through appraisals

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, staff told us that they had annual appraisals that were reviewed on a regular basis, including mid-term reviews. These are supplemented by one-to-one meetings with their managers.

Objectives are linked to team planning, broader CRMP priorities and individual training and development needs. There is a clear focus on succession planning, despite the limited promotion opportunities due to the size of the service.

In our staff survey, 40 percent of respondents (55 out of 136) reported that they had monthly discussions with their manager about how well they were performing at work, and 36 percent of respondents (49 out of 136) reported they had these discussions weekly. A total of 85 percent of respondents (115 out of 136) agreed that the one-to-one discussions they had with their line manager were helping them to achieve their full potential.

Each staff member has individual goals and objectives, and regular performance assessments. Staff feel confident in the performance and development arrangements in place.

Staff feel that promotion and progression processes are fair

The service has put considerable effort into developing its promotion and progression processes so that they are fair and all staff can understand them. It has a detailed development and promotion policy to support individuals for promotion. The policy information includes the scope of the procedure and an overview of the process to help the reader understand what will be involved.

The service advertises vacancies internally and externally, and includes additional information to make sure that people who are less familiar with the service receive relevant information, for example how the service uses talent pools to hold successful but not immediately appointed candidates, how the service uses permanent and temporary promotions, and how a member of staff can transfer between different contracts of employment and work patterns.

The promotion and progression policies are comprehensive and cover opportunities in all roles.

The service manages selection processes consistently. It has made changes to the recruitment process based on staff feedback. The process now includes operational staff, firefighters and supervisory managers on the interview panel for whole-time and apprentice recruitment. Staff on the panel can only take part if they have received training that covers [unconscious bias](#) and information about the process itself. The human resources team provide this training in person. The service also uses temporary promotions appropriately to fill short-term resourcing gaps.

The service has limited diversity in its leadership roles

The service needs to encourage applicants from diverse backgrounds into middle and senior-level positions. We found limited evidence of roles being advertised externally, and posts tend to be filled by internal candidates, so the service isn't making the most of opportunities to make its workforce more representative. It isn't using a wide range of external platforms to advertise vacancies.

The service has a pathway to develop leaders

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

The service holds a list of staff members who have expressed an interest in development or have been accepted onto a development plan for progression, which is accessed through the appraisal process. There is a future leaders programme for supervisory managers and staff who work at an equivalent level and have a non-operational contract. There is also a women's leadership programme for firefighters, supervisory managers and staff who work at the same level in non-uniform (corporate) roles.

There are talent management schemes to develop specific staff. The service has an effective development pathway for leaders. Staff feel that the pathway is comprehensive and provides them with a professional and structured approach. Confidence in the process is improving, and staff told us more applications to join the talent management schemes were made in 2024/25 than ever before.

The development pathway is structured for each role. For example, the station manager succession process involves the member of staff working to attain qualifications such as ILM leadership and management level 5 and the National Examination Board in Occupational Safety and Health certificate in occupational health and safety. The pathway has been designed to be manageable and supportive.

Although the development pathway is structured, it doesn't provide an option for high-potential staff and aspirational leaders to accelerate their learning so that they can access a direct route to senior leadership roles in the service. This means that staff may encounter delays in realising their full potential, and may look for alternative employment. Developing an accelerated pathway could also contribute to the service improving diversity at middle and senior levels sooner.

The service has considered the December 2022 Leading the Service and Leading and Developing People fire standards and how they will implement them.

