

Fire & Rescue Service 2023–25

Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service

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Changes to this round of inspection

We last inspected East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service in June 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 East Sussex 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 East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service has performed in 11 areas. We have made the following graded judgments:

Outstanding	Good	Adequate	Requires improvement	Inadequate
	Understanding fire and risk	Responding to fires and emergencies	Preventing fire and risk	
	Public safety through fire regulation	Responding to major incidents		
	Best use of resources	Promoting values and culture		
	Future affordability	Promoting fairness and diversity		
	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 East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service, and I am grateful for the positive and constructive way in which the service worked with our inspection staff.

I am pleased with the performance of East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service in keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks in some areas, but it needs to improve in other areas to provide a consistently good service. For example, by making sure it can provide effective prevention activities to its communities and that it can consistently meet the welfare needs of staff following operational incidents.

I was pleased to see that the service has made progress since our 2022 inspection. For example, it has improved the way it identifies, assesses and mitigates risks in line with a robust risk reduction process.

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

- The service works effectively with partners to reduce risk and promote community safety.
- The service understands the current financial challenges it faces and has made plans to meet them, while also considering potential future challenges and developing plans around how it might meet them.
- The service has improved its approach to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), and has an effective process in place to assess equality impact, and a comprehensive and accessible [equality impact assessment](#) (EQIA) register.
- The service has improved the way in which it evaluates and learns from operational activity, but it needs to make sure this is embedded across the organisation.
- The service has improved its feedback systems but needs to make sure all staff are confident in them.
- The service needs to improve some areas of operational and multi-agency response.

Overall, I am satisfied with East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service's performance and the improvements it has made since our last inspection. I encourage it to continue to improve in the areas we have highlighted.



Roy Wilsher
HM Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Service in numbers



Profile

	East Sussex	England
Area		
Square miles	693	50,370
Population (thousands)		
30 June 2023	835	57,690
Population density		
Thousands per square mile	1.2	1.1



Cost

Funding		
Year ending 31 March 2023	£43.4m	£2.5bn
Expenditure per population		
Year ending 31 March 2023	£58.40	£46.66

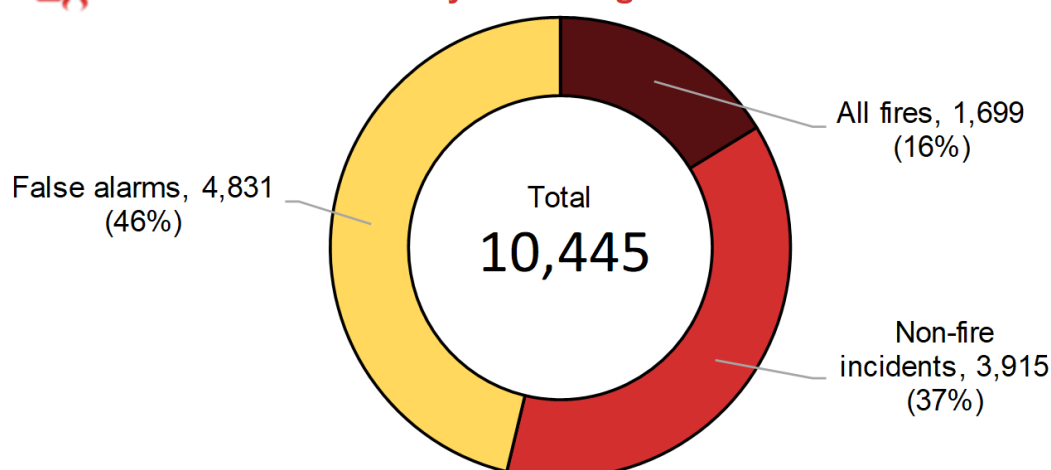


Response

Incidents attended per 1,000 population		
Year ending 30 June 2024	12.5	10.3
Home fire safety visits carried out by fire and rescue service per 1,000 population		
Year ending 31 March 2024	10.9	9.8
Fire safety audits per 100 known premises		
Year ending 31 March 2024	1.4	2.0
Availability of wholetime pumps		
Year ending 31 March 2024	99.3%	
Availability of on-call pumps		
Year ending 31 March 2024	44.5%	



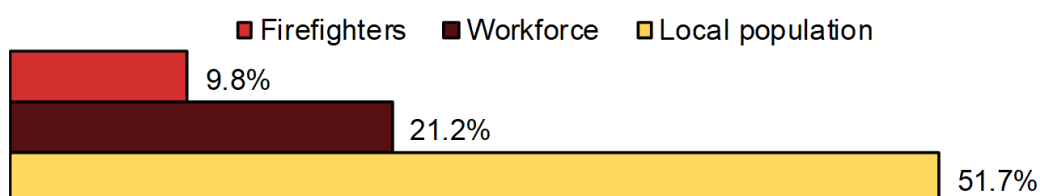
Incidents attended in year ending 30 June 2024



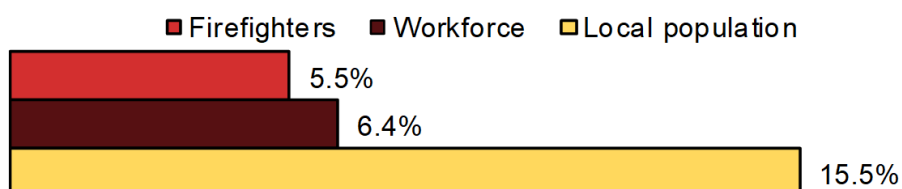
Workforce

	East Sussex	England
Five-year change in total workforce 2019 to 2024	-9.8%	1.9%
Number of firefighters per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2024	0.66	0.60
Percentage of firefighters who are wholetime Year ending 31 March 2024	64.1%	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

East Sussex 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 effectively identifies and understands risks in the community

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.

For example, the service uses incident data, national and community risk register data, demographic data from [Mosaic](#) and the census, and data from local councils. It also considers future risks, such as an increase in extreme weather events. As part of the south-east operational response and resilience group, it works with neighbouring services to improve its resilience and ability to respond.

The service has consulted and held constructive dialogue with its communities and other relevant parties to understand risk and explain how it intends to mitigate it. For example, it has introduced a public advisory group, to better understand gaps in the service.

The service carries out public engagement activities through its safer communities team. It shares station risk profiles with the public and then asks for feedback through online focus groups, telephone surveys and writing to households. It also works with local councils to learn about the use of farm buildings so it can better understand potential risks at those sites.

The service has an effective community risk management plan

Once it has assessed risks, the service records its findings in an easily understood [community risk management plan \(CRMP\)](#). The service refers to its CRMP as 'Planning for a Safer Future: Integrated Risk Management Plan 2020–25'. It 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. Its four main objectives are to:

- deliver high performing services;
- engage with its communities;
- have a safe and valued workforce; and
- make effective use of its resources.

As this plan is coming to an end, the service has been developing its new CRMP for 2025–30. This is due to be approved in February 2026. The service will continue to increase effectiveness and mitigate risk by evaluating and building on work it has already implemented. This includes changes to the way fire stations and fire engines are resourced and the vehicles used, while also considering the impact that population and environmental changes may have.

The service effectively gathers, maintains and shares a good range of risk information

The service routinely collects and updates the information it has about the highest-risk people, places and threats it has identified. This includes the use of its risk reduction process, which uses a six-risk score matrix that considers premises type, building use, the demographic of the occupants, firefighter risk, heritage risk, and environmental risk. This process allows risk to be triaged, higher risks identified, and resources allocated accordingly, to better mitigate that risk. It also attends [safety advisory group](#) meetings to plan for temporary risks associated with large public events, such as Brighton Pride.

We sampled a broad range of the risk information the service collects, including operational risk information for high-rise premises and hotels, industrial sites and short-term event risk information.

This information is readily available for the service's prevention, protection and response staff. This means these teams can identify, reduce and mitigate risk effectively. For example, premises risk information is available on the [mobile data terminals](#) on the fire engines, to support effective decision-making at fires and other incidents. Where appropriate, the service shares risk information with other organisations, such as local housing authorities, police and immigration services to identify joint working opportunities.

The service shares information and fire safety checklists with the Care Quality Commission. It also shares risk information via joint [fire control](#) (JFC) to make sure its cross-border response is effective.

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

The service uses the outcomes of operational activity effectively to build an 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, local risk information held on the community risk management (CRM) database is updated by and shared across prevention, protection and response staff, to prompt and support future activity. The service also considers how national recommendations, such as those from the Manchester Arena terrorist incident, will affect risk to firefighters and the public, and how this may affect future plans.

Preventing fires and other risks

Requires improvement

East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement 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.

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure it carries out [home safety visits](#) in a timely manner.

The service should make sure it puts effective measures in place to address the backlog of [safe and well visits](#).

The service should make sure its staff can target and deal with high risk more effectively when carrying out home safety visits.

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 prioritises risk

The service's prevention strategy is clearly linked to the risks it has identified in its CRMP. The strategy adopts the [National Fire Chiefs Council \(NFCC\)](#) person-centred approach to help prioritise intervention to support the strategic objective of identifying the highest risk and providing an appropriate response to reduce that risk.

The service's teams work well together and with other relevant organisations on prevention, and they share relevant information when needed. In 2023/24, the service carried out 3,599 prevention visits as a direct result of referrals from other agencies.

The service uses information to adjust its planning assumptions and direct activity between its prevention, protection and response functions. It does this through its risk reduction process and its annual assessment of risk.

It also works closely with partners such as the police, social services, GPs, local authorities, [domestic abuse](#) organisations and mental health services to identify and reduce risk in different areas.

The service targets its prevention activity according to 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 carries out home safety visits that have been categorised using the NFCC's four levels of risk – very high, high, medium and low – alongside health, living, incident and environmental factors that influence risk.

It uses a broad range of information and data to target its prevention activity at vulnerable individuals and groups. For example, its annual assessments of risk (local and service-wide) make the prevention team aware of community risks.

The service liaises with partners to identify risk, provide training about levels of risks and promote the referral process. It receives referrals from about 80 partners.

It carries out a wider range of interventions, which it adapts to the level of risk in its communities. The population that the service covers is diverse, and it targets certain prevention activity based on this. For example, it carries out water safety sessions for university students promoting the Don't Drink and Drown campaign.

It also targets older people in certain areas of the county where firefighters test the safety of electric blankets. The service also provides a Fire Cadets programme that promotes fire safety and community involvement among local young people aged 13--17.

The service needs to make sure it can effectively carry out all the home safety visits on its system, in a timely manner

For the year ending 31 March 2024, the service carried out 9,075 home safety visits, which is an increase on the previous 12 months when it carried out 7,497. In the year ending 31 March 2024, it carried out 10.9 home safety visits per 1,000 population.

However, during our last inspection we identified as an area of improvement that the service should ensure it carries out home safety visits in a timely manner. This was because in some cases the service didn't carry out the visits in the time frames it set itself, resulting in a backlog of visits.

During this inspection, we found three specific issues.

The backlog of visits has increased. As at 31 March 2024, it was 614, up from 193 in the previous 12 months. The service told us that it had risen again to 1,066 at the time of inspection.

The service doesn't make referrals within its own time frames. It defines good as 85 percent completion within its time frames. However, in 2023/24 the service reported that 74.3 percent of high- and very high-risk visits, and 61.8 percent of medium-risk visits were completed within its time frames.

Operational crews could be used better to make sure they provide the home safety visits communities need. Some home safety visits are allocated to them each month, but not enough to achieve the target set by the service. As a result, they make up the shortfall by generating home safety visits themselves, which means they aren't helping to reduce the backlog.

The service is aware of these issues and is working to address them. It told us much of the backlog increase and the lengthy referral times were due to migration of information to its CRM database. The service told us this would be complete a few months after our inspection, and it would improve management, auditing and performance of prevention data.

At the time of our inspection, a combination of the system becoming more intuitive and four new permanent staff members employed in January 2025 was having a positive effect on the backlog numbers and the time to get referrals onto the system. This went from 40 days in Q1 of 2024/25, to 21 days in Q2, and 12 days in Q3. CRM will also help generate performance dashboards to support the number of home safety visits the service provides to its communities.

The service also told us that it recognised the need to enhance resilience for providing high- and very high-risk home safety visits, and plan to train operational crews to carry out visits involving sensory alarms. This arrangement will be formalised as part of a new risk reduction manual following consultation within the service.

We are pleased to see the service has started work to address the areas for improvement we identified during our inspection. We would encourage it to maintain its momentum, and we look forward to seeing the outcomes.

Staff are confident in identifying vulnerability and raising safeguarding concerns

The service has a comprehensive [safeguarding](#) policy. All staff complete an annual e-learning safeguarding package, which is monitored via a performance dashboard. Specialist staff also complete enhanced safeguarding training and attend development events.

Staff we interviewed told us about occasions when they had identified safeguarding problems. They gave us examples of when they had raised safeguarding concerns after they had carried out home safety visits and witnessed signs of confusion, and smoking-related and financial concerns. They told us they feel confident and trained to act appropriately and promptly.

The service works effectively with others to reduce risk

The service works with a wide range of other organisations to prevent fires and other emergencies and improve community safety. These include police, local authorities, GPs, social services, local area safer community partnerships, and safeguarding, mental health and domestic abuse organisations. The service also plays a key role in the South East Prevention group through the NFCC.

It also works well with others to promote road safety as members of the Sussex Safer Roads Partnership and the East Sussex Road Safety Partnership. Operational staff work with partners to hold events at accident blackspots and are involved in the Road Safety Action Group.

The service routinely exchanges information with other public sector organisations about people and groups at greatest risk. It uses this information to challenge planning assumptions and target prevention activity. For example, the service was involved in an initiative with Sussex Police and HM Coastguard to develop and provide a safety session for unaccompanied young people entering the UK via boats. The sessions provide safety advice on topics such as safe road crossing, water safety and protecting oneself from becoming a [victim](#) of crime.

The service also works with the police and crime commissioner to provide the Watch Out programme, aimed at vulnerable 11–16-year-olds who aren't participating at school or may feel excluded from society.

The service tackles fire-setting behaviour effectively and supports the prosecution of arsonists

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. This includes the Firewise scheme that it runs to tackle fire-setting, hoax calls, fear of fire and other fire-related concerns in [children](#) and young people. The service accepts referrals for this scheme and works with several partners to provide it through youth engagement work. This includes working with:

- primary, secondary and special schools;
- key workers;
- social workers;
- drug and alcohol practitioners;
- youth justice workers;

- child and adolescent mental health services;
- Sussex Police;
- parents and carers; and
- registered children's homes.

When appropriate, it routinely shares information with relevant organisations to support the prosecution of arsonists. The service works closely with police on the issue of deliberate fires. In one example involving two arsonists from Brighton, the service worked with Sussex Police and Prometheus Forensic Services while carrying out a fire investigation. This joint work resulted in the two individuals being prosecuted and jailed in January 2025.

The service evaluates the work it carries out

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, the service uses performance measures and quality assurance processes to make sure its risk reduction activities are being carried out to the highest standards. As part of this, it considers local and national learning and organisational review processes, including operational, fatal fire and serious incident reviews.

Prevention activities take account of feedback from the public, other organisations and other parts of the service. For example, the service told us that 921 prevention activities had been quality assured in 2024/25. The service does this via phone calls, on tablets or through QR codes on the website. Volunteers in the prevention team call 10 percent of residents who have had a home safety visit to find out how satisfied they were with the service. At the time of our inspection, the service was only doing this following safe and well advisor visits, but in future it will broaden its activity to include visits from operational crews.

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

Good

East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service is good at protecting the public through fire regulation.

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

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 an effective protection strategy which is linked to its CRMP

The service's protection strategy is clearly linked to the risks it has identified in its CRMP. The prevention and protection strategy 2025–30 details how it will manage and reduce risk through enforcing fire safety legislation, giving advice and support and reducing incidents of arson to make its communities safer.

Staff across the service are involved in this activity, effectively exchanging information as needed. For example, operational crews carry out fire safety checks at lower-risk properties such as shops, offices, restaurants and warehouses. They then liaise with fire safety teams if they come across any non-compliance. Crews told us they were confident doing this and raising issues at other times, for example during incidents.

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 with risk.

The more low-level audits the crews carry out, the more areas of non-compliance they have uncovered. This has led to more risk being identified and managed; for example crews have uncovered sleeping risks at premises that wouldn't have been visited originally. The protection team is now dealing with those premises.

The service targets high-risk buildings effectively

The service's risk-based inspection programme (RBIP) is focused on the service's highest-risk buildings. It uses its risk reduction process to give buildings a risk score based on:

- premises type;
- building use;
- the demographic of the occupants;
- firefighter risk;
- heritage risk; and
- environmental risk.

The service told us that this system allowed it to make sure the premises at the top of its RBIP were the highest-risk buildings. Using traditional risk factors can lead to premises such as care homes, which are generally well managed, being at the top of the list without necessarily being the highest risk.

At the time of inspection, the service told us it had 2,736 high-risk premises on its RBIP audit list. The service has set itself a six-year timescale in which to complete its high-risk audits. While this is outside national guidance, it is appropriate for the service. It has a target of 500 audits per year, and so it thinks it can visit all its high-risk premises within the timescale.

The service carries out consistent, good quality audits

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

Most of 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 via the CRM system, mobile data terminals and [mobilisation](#) information, which is the information crews receive when they go out to an incident.

The service quality assures its protection activity

The service carries out proportionate quality assurance of its protection activity. It has a dashboard that displays the quality assurance work carried out through a sample of audits across all the stations and the three protection hubs. We saw a positive example of this work driving improvement when human error had resulted in a formal notice not being uploaded appropriately. The service has now updated the system, so a prompt occurs if an error such as this happens, preventing similar problems in future.

The service use performance measures and quality assurance processes to make sure its risk reduction activities are being provided to the highest standards. As part of this, the service considers local and national learning, and reviews processes including operational, fatal fire and serious incident reviews.

The service has a positive approach to enforcement

The service consistently uses its full range of enforcement powers, and when appropriate, it prosecutes those who don't comply with fire safety regulations. It has dedicated members of staff to support this work.

In the year ending 31 March 2024, the service issued 226 informal notifications, 71 enforcement notices, 47 prohibition notices and carried out 13 prosecutions. It completed 14 prosecutions in the five years from 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2024.

The service allocates enough resources to its protection work

The service has enough qualified protection staff to meet the requirements of its RBIP. As at 31 March 2024, it had 20 competent staff (with a level 4 diploma in fire safety) and 16 staff in development.

This staffing level helps it provide the range of audit and enforcement activity it needs, both now and in the future. It has three protection hubs across the service, and can move staff without compromising provision, for example, if there is a spike in legal cases. The service also has the cover it needs 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to comply with regulatory obligations through its flexible duty system officers.

Staff get the right training and work to appropriate accreditation. The service has recruited six trainees over the last three years and has improved the training they receive, linking it to the leadership behavioural framework and the NFCC competency framework.

The service is adapting 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](#). Protection team members are involved in this work. The service also has two members of staff working toward their diploma so that they can be solely dedicated to supporting this area of work. At the time of our inspection the full impact this was having on other protection activity was unclear, and the service will look again at the two-person team when they are trained. We look forward to seeing the outcomes of this.

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.

Protection staff told us they had written to individuals responsible for tall buildings within the county to inform them of changes in legislation. We found the service has good arrangements in place to receive this information. For example, it has developed a building fire safety regulations section on its website. The website tells people responsible for high-rise buildings what the new law requires them to do and allows them to submit the required information online.

The service works closely with other enforcement agencies

The service works closely with other enforcement agencies to regulate fire safety, and it routinely exchanges risk information with them. For example, it works closely with local housing authorities such as Brighton and Hove to exchange information and deal with issues in their flats. It also works with the Environment Agency to help understand and reduce environmental risk.

The service is also part of a joint agency working group called Discovery. This sees the service work closely with the police, housing authorities and Trading Standards to identify people sleeping in premises where they shouldn't be. The relevant agency then takes appropriate enforcement action.

The service responds well to building consultations

The service responds to all building consultations on time. This means it consistently meets its statutory responsibility to comment on fire safety arrangements at new and altered buildings. In 2023/24, the service responded to 98.6 percent of building consultations (698 out of 708) and 98.7 percent of licensing consultations (311 out of 315) within the required time frames.

The service works well with businesses

The service proactively works with local businesses and other organisations to promote compliance with fire safety legislation. It has one staff member in protection dedicated to this, and there is a large amount of fire safety information for businesses on the service's website, including an interactive toolkit and video on general business fire safety awareness. The service also offers a free, half-day introduction to business safety course, and it holds webinars to promote business safety.

The service works with businesses through the [primary authority scheme](#).

Two members of staff from the service take a lead on the scheme and work with around 26 partners. These include the Eastbourne Hospitality Association, care homes, independent schools, retail and restaurant chains, and businesses in the waste and recycling sector.

The service is making good progress to reduce unwanted fire signals

The service has an effective risk-based approach in place to manage the number of unwanted fire signals. The service no longer attends calls from automatic fire alarms at low-risk commercial premises. It has also strengthened the way it targets and manages repeat offenders.

The service attends fewer calls from automatic fire alarms because of this work. During the period 1 October 2023 to 31 March 2024, the proportion of automatic fire alarm requests not attended was 25.1 percent. The period 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024 covers the time since the service implemented its new approach to challenging calls from automatic fire alarms. In this time, the proportion of automatic fire alarms not attended increased to 41.3 percent.

Fewer unwanted calls 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

Adequate

East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service is adequate at responding to fires and other emergencies.

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

Areas for improvement

The service should improve the availability of its on-call crewed fire engines to respond to incidents in line with its [integrated risk management plan](#).

The service should make sure it has an effective system for learning from operational incidents.

The service should make sure it has the appropriate resources in place to achieve its plan with regard to the adoption and implementation of [national operational guidance](#) in a timely manner.

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 aligns its resources with the risks identified in its CRMP

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 uses a range of duty systems across its 24 fire stations to maximise the effectiveness and efficiency of its workforce. This is further supported by the service's flexible resource pool and a logistical control support team.

The service manages its emergency cover using the Dynamic Cover Tool, which matches resources to risk. This shows where the main risks are and where cover needs to be. The service also uses a predictive modelling kit, Phoenix, to assess impact on response times based on data and decisions. This helps the service move fire engines, other vehicles and staff to stations near the greatest risk, known as standby moves.

The service is meeting its response standards

There are no national response standards of performance for the public. But the service has set out its own response standards in its CRMP. It measures response standards from the time of call to the first fire engine arriving at an incident, and commits to a response time within 10 minutes 70 percent of the time where staff are on a station (on-station attendance). Where staff aren't at a station and are on-call, the response time target is 70 percent within 15 minutes (on-call attendance).

The service consistently meets its achievable standards. Data it supplied shows that in the year ending 31 March 2024, the service met its targets and achieved a 10-minute on-station attendance 78.1 percent of the time, and a 15 minute on-call attendance 75.2 percent of the time.

Home Office data shows that in the year ending 31 March 2024, the service's average response time to [primary fires](#) was 8 minutes and 50 seconds. This is faster than the average for significantly rural services, which is 10 minutes and 15 seconds, and faster than the England average, which is 9 minutes and 3 seconds. For the year ending 31 March 2024, the service's average response time to secondary fires was 9 minutes and 38 seconds, which is also faster than the average for significantly rural services, which is 10 minutes and 33 seconds, and slightly slower than the England average, which is 9 minutes and 23 seconds.

The service is working to improve availability of fire engines

To support its response strategy, the service aims to achieve 100 percent [wholetime](#) fire engine availability. For the year ending 31 March 2024, the service achieved 99.3 percent against this target. For on-call fire engines, availability was considerably lower at only 44.5 percent for the same period. This had the effect of bringing overall availability down to 70.2 percent.

During our last inspection, we raised on-call availability as an area for improvement. Since then, the service has carried out an on-call review and produced an on-call action plan which continues to be implemented. The flexible resource pool is also supporting the service to use staff more flexibly and improve fire engine availability.

Data the service supplied to us at the time of inspection showed that in the previous 12 months, it had achieved over 95 percent average availability for the two on-call fire engines that it aspired to have available 100 percent of the time. In the same period, it achieved an average of 47 percent for the 11 on-call fire engines that it aspired to have available 50 percent of the time.

We look forward to seeing the progress of the ongoing work in this area and any resulting changes.

Staff have a good understanding of how to command incidents safely

The service has trained incident commanders, who are assessed regularly and properly. Operational staff complete training and assessment for incident command levels 1–4, and these are recorded on the HR system FireWatch. The training covers all aspects of incident command, including decision logging and the use of analytical risk assessments.

Assessment and maintenance of incident commanders' competence includes incident and exercise attendance, attendance at training days, and a two-yearly revalidation. 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 \(JESIP\)](#).

Control staff should be more involved in service exercises and debriefs

We were disappointed to find that the service's control staff felt that they weren't routinely included in its command, training, exercise, debrief and assurance activity. Control staff we spoke to told us that they had little involvement with service debriefs or fatal fire reviews. They did tell us, however, that they were able to submit learning for any incident via a feedback form accessible to all via the intranet.

They also told us that they were rarely fully involved in service exercises; generally they are involved once a year. They do have some involvement in smaller exercises but often this is limited to the sending of radio messages.

Risk information is up to date and accessible

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

The information we reviewed was up to date and detailed. Staff could easily access and understand it. They can access it easily using mobile data terminals, and information is also shared via a monthly bulletin. Information on high risks is shared through central communications and can be added to information crews get when they go to an incident, known as turnout messages. We were encouraged to find that information on high risks had been completed with input from the service's prevention, protection and response functions when appropriate through the CRM system. When this is updated, the information becomes available within minutes.

An area for improvement we highlighted in our last inspection was that the service should make sure that fire control has full access to relevant and up-to-date risk information. It is encouraging to see that this has now been addressed, and information is available. However, the service may benefit from making sure all JFC staff are familiar with how to access it.

The service should implement national operational guidance promptly

We found some evidence that the service has started to implement national operational guidance, but we found that it hadn't made enough progress in this area.

We found some positive work, such as the alignment of training with national operational guidance, and general compliance with the national operational guidance strategic gap analysis for incident command. But we found other strategic gap analysis work to be inconsistent, unclear and incomplete. We also found the service didn't have enough staff to implement guidance. This is particularly evident in JFC.

The service acknowledges that implementation could be more effective, and we would encourage it to make sure it gives greater priority to adoption and implementation.

The service should make sure it evaluates operational performance and shares learning effectively

As part of our inspection, we reviewed a range of emergency incidents and training events. These include domestic, commercial and high-rise incidents and a special service call.

The service introduced a new incident debrief and [organisational learning](#) policy in July 2024. It is a comprehensive document and outlines types of debriefs, and how and when they should be carried out. It is unclear, however, if this policy is being consistently followed and is fully embedded across the service.

In some files we viewed, we found a comprehensive account of the incident with a clear narrative, learning outcomes listed and a clear action plan for the service. Staff also showed good understanding and could evidence their role in the process.

However, we also found evidence that the post-incident review process may not be robust, understood and embedded. We found several fire engine commanders and officers not engaging with the requirement for returns, and uncertainty about whether a structured debrief had been carried out for an incident when we would have expected there to be one. We found no evidence of an action matrix for the learning from operational incidents that is required.

For this reason, the area for improvement relating to learning from operational incidents that we identified during our last inspection will remain. We encourage the service to fully embed its policy and procedures to fully learn, and share learning from all incidents, to improve its service for the public.

We did find that the service had introduced an operational learning feedback portal to gather other learning, and we found that when learning was identified, it was shared effectively through assurance in action bulletins that were well received by the staff we spoke to.

We were encouraged to see the service is contributing towards, and acting on, learning from other fire and rescue services or operational learning gathered from emergency service partners. This includes having a single point of contact for national operational learning and [joint organisational learning](#) and monitoring officers in the operational planning and policy team. An officer from the service chairs the response group in the Sussex Resilience Forum (SRF). The response group disseminates learning from SRF activity.

The service keeps the public informed of ongoing incidents

The service has good systems in place to inform the public about ongoing incidents and help keep them safe during and after incidents. This includes being part of the warn and inform group through the SRF. The group communicates messages to the public during major incidents. The service also has a duty communications team that sends out relevant messages.

Responding to major and multi-agency incidents

Adequate

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

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

Areas for improvement

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

The service should make sure it has a plan to consistently carry out internal (including tall buildings), cross-border and multi-agency exercises, with learning from them recorded and shared.

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

Main findings

The service is prepared for major and multi-agency incidents

The service has effectively anticipated and considered the reasonably foreseeable risks and threats it may face. These risks are listed in both local and national risk registers as part of the CRMP. The service also uses its 'Operational Response Review' and 'Annual Strategic Assessment of Risk' documents to further consider risks of incidents at [COMAH sites](#), regional sites (such as Gatwick Airport and a nuclear power station in Kent), and through environmental changes leading to more extreme weather conditions.

It is also familiar with the significant risks neighbouring fire and rescue services may face, and which it might reasonably be asked to respond to in an emergency. These include risks which are up to 10 km outside the service's border. Firefighters have access to this risk information from neighbouring services via their mobile data terminals.

The service is supported by JFC, which also serves Surrey and West Sussex. Relevant risk information is shared here, and JFC can also pass information to crews from other agencies. This is done through the multi-agency incident transfer system. At the time of our inspection, the service was trialling this and planned to go live later in 2025. It allows incidents and information to be passed between emergency service partners, keeping phone lines free and sharing situational awareness.

The service could improve its ability to respond to major incidents involving tall buildings

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.

We found the service had policies and procedures in place for safely managing this type of incident, detailing roles and responsibilities regarding fire survival guidance and evacuation. We found that staff at all levels generally understood them. There was some initial face-to-face tall building training (in 2022/23). However, ongoing training now is through an e-learning package. While local station training is happening, we saw limited evidence of service-wide practical training.

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 were robust enough to receive and manage this volume of calls. But the service relies too heavily on paper-based systems. It doesn't have an electronic method of sharing fire survival guidance information. Instead, this information is passed from fire control to staff at the incident via radio messages. These processes are too open to operator error.

They also mean that staff in the emergency control room, at the incident and in assisting control rooms can't share, view and update actions in real time.

These systems could compromise the service's ability to safely resolve a major incident at a tall building. The service recognises this and is looking at the different systems it could implement to improve performance. We look forward to seeing the progress the service has made in this area at our next inspection.

The service works well with other fire and rescue services

The service supports other fire and rescue services responding to emergency incidents. For example, through JFC, East Sussex crews are routinely mobilised alongside West Sussex and Surrey crews, and the service has several specially trained staff to join West Sussex staff and respond effectively to terrorist-related incidents. It is intraoperable with these services and can form part of a multi-agency response.

It also supports the national response by designating holding areas for national assets in the county. The service has two nationally declared assets for national resilience operations – a high-volume pumping unit and a mass decontamination unit. National Resilience Fire Control can deploy these resources nationally on request from an affected service under the National Coordination and Advisory Framework.

The service should have an effective exercise plan

Although we found that the service had been involved in a multi-agency exercise within the last two years, we found limited evidence of other multi-agency and cross-border exercises and no effective overall exercise plan.

For example, during 2023/24, the service completed two training exercises with neighbouring fire and rescue services and was involved in one national resilience and three multi-agency exercises. This has decreased from 2022/23 when the service completed 6 exercises with neighbouring fire and rescue services and was involved in 2 national resilience and 14 multi-agency exercises.

The service's policy sets expectations that exercises at different levels should be carried out. But the extent to which the service understands and adheres to these expectations is unclear. A robust, effective exercise plan could help staff work more effectively together to keep the public safe. The plan should include the risks of major events at which the service could foreseeably give support or ask for help from neighbouring services. The service should also use learning from these exercises to inform risk information and service plans.

Incident commanders have a good understanding of JESIP

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

The service could give us evidence that it consistently follows these principles. This includes e-learning for all operational officers, supported by police, fire and ambulance training days and multi-agency tabletop exercises and live play exercises run through the service training centre. All officers have the JESIP app installed on their phones.

Due to the lack of a comprehensive exercise plan, the service could be missing the opportunity to carry out robust debriefs after multi-agency exercises. This means it may not be identifying any problems it has with applying JESIP. This could compromise the service's ability to respond effectively with other emergency services when major incidents do occur.

The service plays an active role in the local resilience forum

The service has good arrangements in place to respond to emergencies with partners that make up the SRF. These arrangements include an officer seconded to the SRF and being involved in climate change work, in the face of an increase in wildfires and flooding. (Fire and rescue services in England have no statutory responsibility to attend flooding.)

The service is a valued partner and contributes through its presence on the executive group, chairing the response group and sitting on several of the forum's working groups. The service takes part in regular training events with other forum members.

It uses the learning from incidents to develop planning assumptions about responding to major and multi-agency incidents. For example, following a fire at one of the region's hospitals, the service worked closely with NHS Sussex, which was heavily involved in the debrief process. This helped identify learning, which is being used to support the implementation of changes. Learning is also being shared more widely with other SRF members.

The service considers and shares wider learning

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

The service recently had an officer seconded to the NFCC, which supported its awareness and understanding of national learning. And it has an operational assurance manager who is the single point of contact for this learning and makes sure all relevant learning is shared appropriately.

Making best use of resources

Good

East Sussex 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 2024/25 is £50 million. This is an 11 percent increase from the previous financial year.

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

Main findings

The service effectively reviews and allocates resources to risk

The service's financial and workforce plans, including allocating resources to prevention, protection and response, continue to be consistent with the risks and priorities it has identified in its CRMP. Since our last inspection, the service has increased staff numbers in the protection and prevention departments.

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. For example, it has made changes to day crewing and group crewing. The service has also closed Mayfield on-call fire station because many incidents firefighters from that station attended could be covered by others, and it wasn't cost-effective to keep it open. Operational staff also routinely carry out lower-risk home safety visits and business safety visits, and gather site-specific risk information.

The service has put in place processes to deal with staffing shortfalls through the logistics control support team. The service helps fill gaps in crews by moving staff from other locations, using a flexible resource pool and overtime. The service recognises it could manage staff resourcing more effectively. It is working to improve availability, absence and overtime.

The service manages emergency cover well using the Dynamic Cover Tool, which matches resources to risk. This allows the service to redistribute resources according to the dynamic risk.

It 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. Assistant directors are asked to justify revenue and capital spending plans at a 'Star Chamber' meeting chaired by the finance team. These proposals are then shared with senior leadership, who further challenge, scrutinise and prioritise the plans.

The service effectively manages and monitors workforce productivity and performance

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 collects performance data through [watch](#) and team end-of-month returns. This data is displayed on dashboards which managers can access. The assurance, governance and performance group monitors organisational performance and key performance indicators. The service reports on its performance to the [fire and rescue authority](#) quarterly.

The service makes the most of its wholetime firefighter capacity. For example, operational crews have monthly targets for home safety visits, community engagement and business safety visits. The service has produced a watch capacity review document which provides guidance on the structure of day and night shifts for crews. Supervisory managers can deviate from the guidance to make best use of time when necessary.

The service is taking steps to make sure the workforce's time is as productive as possible. This includes putting in place new ways of working. For example, it has improved broadband and wireless network arrangements to allow more flexible working across more sites.

It is encouraging that crews carry out both protection and prevention work through fire safety visits and home safety visits. However, we did note that the service could enhance resilience for providing high- and very high-risk home safety visits by using its operational crews better. We were pleased to see that service had plans to do this by training crews to carry out home safety visits involving sensory alarms. We look forward to seeing the outcomes of this, once approved.

The service collaborates effectively

We were pleased to see the service meets its statutory duty to collaborate. It routinely considers opportunities to collaborate with other emergency responders and agencies. The service shares its headquarters with Sussex Police and is part of the JFC project. As part of this, its in-house control provision has been outsourced to the joint control room operated by Surrey Fire and Rescue Service.

It is also involved in joint procurement and training as part of its collaboration with neighbouring fire and rescue services: East Sussex, Surrey and Kent. The service works collaboratively through the NFCC and Home Office IT projects and boards. It also sits on the South East GRID project, which is a buying consortium alongside Surrey Fire and Rescue Service IT.

Collaborative work is aligned with the priorities in the service's CRMP. For example, as part of the service's prevention activity, it has referral pathways through the NHS, adult social care and the police. The service works closely with these partners to better understand risk and maintain the effectiveness of the pathways.

As part of its protection activity, the service works with East Sussex County Council and Trading Standards to identify and address risk, particularly risk from people sleeping in premises where they shouldn't be. The service also works with the police to support the reduction of risk beyond fire, in areas such as [county lines](#) and [cuckooing](#). It has also worked with Surrey and Sussex police forces to carry out a conditions survey of estates in the area it covers to improve future effectiveness. The service told us this collaboration saved it around £80,000.

We are satisfied that the service monitors, reviews and evaluates the benefits and results of its collaborations. For example, the service monitors 11 performance indicators to make sure it benefits from the JFC collaboration with Surrey and West Sussex fire and rescue services.

We acknowledge that the service wants to collaborate more, particularly to share its estates. However, this isn't always possible due to changing priorities within the police and ambulance services.

The service has effective business continuity arrangements

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 a resilience group which is chaired by a senior officer and meets quarterly, and an industrial action planning group. If business continuity arrangements are initiated, an emergency management team is set up to agree and communicate arrangements. The service has plans to hold three industrial action workshops in 2025.

During our inspection, we also saw effective continuity arrangements in JFC, which are regularly tested.

The service should continue to compare its costs with those of other services

The service is in the upper quartile for total expenditure per head of population and total employee costs per head of population.

Since our last inspection, the service has carried out a programme of work called Future Foundations. It has reviewed its support service structures, ways of working and office space. It has identified savings through this work, with £415,000 of savings planned in 2024/25, rising to an expected £630,000 of savings by 2025/26. This has contributed towards around £2.1 million of identified savings in the 2024/25 budget. At the time of inspection, the service reported it was on track to achieve around £2 million of these savings.

The service is taking steps to make sure it improves efficiency in important areas such as estates, fleet and procurement. For example, the service uses national procurement frameworks, such as the Crown Commercial Service for energy procurement. It also identifies joint procurement opportunities through its collaborations with West Sussex, Surrey and Kent fire and rescue services.

The service has taken part in a [benchmarking](#) exercise with other fire and rescue services. Through this work, it has identified that its fleet and transport costs are relatively high compared with other fire and rescue services.

Following a financial resilience review, the service restructured its finance team and introduced business partners – finance specialists employed by the service who work with the senior leaders to support decision-making. The service told us that this has helped it better understand its costs. At the time of our inspection, the service was reviewing all its non-pay budgets. It should continue to compare its costs with other fire and rescue services to fully understand whether areas of expenditure are above the level it expects.

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

Good

East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service is good at making the service affordable now and in the future.

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

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

Main findings

The service understands its financial challenges

In our previous inspection, an area for improvement was that the service should make sure that it has adequate plans in place to close the budget gaps identified. It has made good progress in this area, and we have closed this area for improvement.

The service has a sound understanding of future financial challenges. It plans to mitigate its financial risks. For example, it holds a contingency of £500,000 to manage unanticipated spending needs. And it has carried out a considerable amount of work to find ways to save.

The underpinning assumptions are relatively robust and realistic. They take account of the wider external environment and some scenario planning for future spending reductions. These include assumptions on government funding, council tax and inflation. The service considers funding uncertainties and includes these in its strategic risk register. And its scenario planning work allows it to identify a potential range of savings that will be needed in the future. This has informed how it has developed savings options. At the time of our inspection, the service anticipated a budget shortfall of around £2.8 million in 2025/26. The service has identified savings

which would meet such a gap and achieve a balanced budget. But it would need to make further savings in its worst-case scenario. The service plans to develop further savings options through the development of its next CRMP and by reviewing its non-pay budgets, where it thinks there are more opportunities to reduce costs. And it has also developed some costed options with ways the service could make savings if it faces financial pressures in the future, along with the anticipated risks to and effects on the service. The service thinks the sale of Mayfield fire station, which it decided to close, will generate around £1 million in capital receipts. It has used £10 million of capital receipts from the sale of its former headquarters and other properties to fund investment in its estate and to minimise borrowing costs.

The service has a clear plan for the use of its reserves

The service has a sensible and sustainable plan for using its reserves. Its minimum general reserve is set at £2.5 million in 2024/25. At the end of 2023/24, earmarked reserves were £10.8 million. The service reviews earmarked reserves annually, and has clear plans for their use. For example, these reserves are used to support the capital programme and IT strategy.

The service has effective estates and fleet plans linked to its CRMP

The service's estate and fleet strategies have clear links to its CRMP and support future service provision. The service aims to provide facilities that are fit for purpose and create effective use of its estate through collaboration, smarter working, reducing revenue costs, income generation, community use and sustainability. It also aims to provide a reliable and fit-for-purpose fleet of vehicles and equipment to meet the needs of the community.

Both strategies exploit opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness. For example, the service regularly reviews the agreed service life of its fleet and extends it where appropriate, and it continues to explore shared estates and facilities to improve service delivery. It is turning the old Newhaven fire station site into an Integrated Transport Function South East Hub (with Surrey and West Sussex fire and rescue services, and Surrey Police) and is working on a shared estates and facilities management service with Sussex Police.

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. It acknowledges that the CRMP determines risk, determining where fire stations are needed and what they will do. The service has agreed a design guide with staff and representative bodies, and at the time of our inspection was carrying out a conditions survey of its estates.

There is flexibility in the estates programme, and the service is concentrating on the bigger and busier stations first, while also catering for changing gender profiles in the service. To manage its fleet, the service has employed a vehicle build officer to make sure supply chain issues and inflation don't harm service delivery.

The service continues to use technology to improve

The service actively considers how changes in technology and future innovation may affect risk. Its CRM project is continuing to develop and will see data files moved onto the database. This is linked to the data retention project which will improve data quality and make systems more efficient. The protection and prevention departments are also moving across to CRM to make working practices more efficient by reducing the use of paper and spreadsheets.

The service also looks to exploit changing technology to improve efficiency and effectiveness. The first generation of tablets that staff use for prevention, protection and response activity was an IT-led project. The service acknowledges it could have done it better if there had been greater operational oversight. It has set up working groups and asked for feedback from staff. At the time of inspection, the software had just been upgraded, and the second-generation tablets were about to be rolled out.

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. The service has outsourced its IT function since 2016. It has plans to continue with this arrangement and procure a new contract later in 2025.

The service has secured some external funding

The service actively considers opportunities for generating extra income, for example through better use of some of its estate's assets.

Where appropriate, it has secured external funding to invest in improvements to the service it gives the public. These include a £1.5m transformation grant towards the Integrated Transport Function at the disused fire station in Newhaven. The service has also secured funding through the Paul Hamlyn Foundation to fund a prevention post for three years. This new role will be to lead youth engagement activities, to reduce the risk of young people disengaging from education and becoming involved in crime.

Promoting the right values and culture

Adequate

East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service is adequate 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.

Area for improvement

The service should make sure it has effective arrangements in place to support all staff in a consistent and timely manner following a traumatic incident.

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 culture, behaviours and values are improving

The service has well-defined values, which staff understand. This was identified as an area for improvement in our last inspection, and we were pleased to see enough improvements in this area to allow us to close it. In our staff survey, 94 percent of respondents (174 out of 186) were aware of the service's statement of values. During our station visits, focus groups and interviews, we found staff at all levels of the service showing behaviours that reflect service values.

We were encouraged by the cultural improvements the service had made and to see that the [Core Code of Ethics](#) had been implemented. But we did find isolated areas where there was still work to be done. While 83 percent of respondents to our staff survey agreed that their colleagues (145 out of 174) and their manager (144 out of 174) consistently modelled and maintained the service's values, this figure dropped to 58 percent (101 out of 174) when they were asked the same question about senior leaders. We found a perception in certain areas of the service that senior

leaders could be more visible, transparent and accountable, for example in JFC, and regarding projects such as the introduction of tablets.

There is a positive working culture throughout the service, with staff empowered and willing to challenge poor behaviours when they come across them. During our inspection, we encountered professional and supportive environments, and positive relationships between staff who were on different crewing arrangements and contracts.

The service has effective mental and physical well-being provision, but improvements could be made

The service has well-understood and effective well-being policies in place, which are available to staff. A significant range of well-being support is available to support both physical and mental health. Examples include:

- occupational health;
- [trauma risk management \(TRiM\)](#) support following traumatic incidents;
- monitoring and follow-up if staff have attended repeated traumatic incidents and not accepted support from the service;
- an employee assistance programme;
- Fire Fighters Charity; and
- access to private health-care services.

There are good provisions in place to promote staff well-being. This includes well-being champions, supportive line managers and access to further counselling. Staff reported that they understand and have confidence in the well-being support available. In our staff survey, 79 percent of respondents (147 out of 186) agreed that they were confident the service would offer well-being services after a workplace incident, and 81 percent of respondents (151 out of 186) agreed that they were able to access services to support mental well-being.

While we did find a TRiM process in place for support following traumatic incidents, it would benefit from a review. We found examples where it had been an effective, positive experience, but also heard a few examples where it hadn't been. Several staff indicated there were capacity issues, and the service offer wasn't always possible within appropriate timescales. Wholetime and on-call staff told us of difficulties in arranging sessions and long wait times. Occupational health gave an example when there were issues with poor availability and fire engines had to remain available during a session. And some of the TRiM practitioners told us that they felt the system was under-resourced and needed increased investment to maintain awareness and improve support. We would also encourage the service to make sure that there are effective arrangements in place to fully support TRiM practitioners.

The service has a positive health and safety culture

The service has effective and well-understood health and safety policies and procedures in place. We found:

- good awareness among staff we spoke to;
- a good level of training and external qualifications at all management levels and appropriate to that level;
- a safety event form used for all accidents and [near misses](#); and
- an online portal for immediate defect reporting.

The service also uses health and safety 'red' bulletins to inform staff of dangerous occurrences and where immediate action is required.

These policies and procedures are readily available, and the service promotes them effectively to all staff. Both staff and representative bodies have confidence in the health and safety approach the service takes, with 82 percent of respondents to our staff survey (152 out of 186) satisfied that their personal safety and welfare was treated seriously at work, and 92 percent (172 out of 186) agreeing that the service had clear procedures to report all accidents, near misses and dangerous occurrences. The Fire Brigades Union confirmed to us that it was always involved in decisions on matters concerning staff health and safety.

The service monitors staff who have secondary employment or dual contracts to make sure they comply with the secondary employment policy and don't work excessive hours. We identified this as an area for improvement during our last inspection, and it is encouraging to see that the service has addressed this with a clear policy detailing individual responsibility, a new reporting system and improved management of overtime. We have closed this area for improvement.

The service is reviewing its absence management

We found there are clear processes in place to manage absences for all staff. There is clear guidance for managers, but they don't always understand and adhere to the process. The service acknowledges that absence is an issue. It is reviewing policies and working with managers to support them in addressing absence. It is also supporting individuals to take more responsibility for their own health.

The service told us for the year ending 31 March 2024, the average number of days/shifts lost to short-term sickness was 3.98, down from 4.27 in the previous year among wholetime operational staff. For long-term sickness, the figure was 8.61 in the year ending 31 March 2024, down from 8.73 in the previous year.

The service is working to bring these figures down further by improved scrutiny and making processes more efficient, for example reducing the amount of time it takes to determine ill health retirement from 2–3 years to 9–12 months, case reviews and a standardised approach to policy application. These changes have led to a drastic reduction in the numbers of staff on light duties.

We look forward to seeing further improvements from this ongoing work.

Getting the right people with the right skills

Good

East Sussex 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 CRMPs. 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.

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 improved its workforce planning

The service has improved its workforce planning, to make sure skills and capabilities align with what it needs to effectively carry out its CRMP. The workforce plan looks at the current and future picture of staff required, and the Firefighter Operational Competence Framework complements this with the skills those staff require and how they acquire, achieve and maintain their skills.

The service can quickly and effectively fill staffing gaps through agile recruitment campaigns along with its use of promotion pools for wholtime operational staff, and recruitment agencies to fill temporary non-operational gaps.

The service subjects its workforce and succession planning to consistent scrutiny in the form of regular meetings to discuss requirements. The people services strategic board oversees and monitors the strategic workforce plan. The workforce planning monitoring and strategic groups monitor the numbers, skills and locations the service needs. The service also carries out an annual assessment of risk, which includes staff skillsets, and supports its workforce planning.

The service understands its workforce skills and capabilities

Staff told us that they could access the training they need to be effective in their role. This wasn't just focused on operational skills. The service's training plans make sure it

can maintain competence and capability effectively. For example, risk-critical skills such as breathing apparatus follow a two-year cycle, and training is pre-programmed.

The operational competence framework is built into the online portal so that e-learning and assessments are aligned with this. There is also the wider package of e-learning that sits alongside this and is easy to access. It covers non-operational areas, such as EDI and safeguarding. The service requires staff to complete many of these courses annually.

The service has good systems in place to monitor the skills and capabilities of its workforce. It uses the FireWatch database which records and displays the dates when training courses are done and the current level of competency. The service runs monthly reports through this database, and station and department managers are required to make sure staff skills are appropriate and up to date. It also holds quarterly meetings to monitor compliance of e-learning, with updates provided to the head of performance. 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.

There is a positive learning and development culture in the service

The service promotes a culture of continuous improvements throughout the organisation, and it encourages staff to learn and develop. For example, staff are encouraged and supported to attend external conferences such as FirePRO to learn and develop, the service runs apprenticeship schemes, and staff attend joint meetings such as the Local Government Association monthly briefing. Staff are also encouraged to complete professional qualifications through the Institution of Fire Engineers, and the service will pay for membership fees for those who pass.

The service has an operational assurance manager to share relevant learning across the organisation, supported since July 2024 by a relatively new debrief and organisational learning policy. It also uses a tracker for the outcomes of investigations to share recommendations and learning. There is an evaluation page on the tablets staff use for prevention activity, where feedback and learning are shared and then used to improve future performance.

We were pleased to see that the service has a range of resources in place. These include access to the e-learning platform Learnpool and external training providers. Operational staff have development folders as part of their initial three-year development plan which lists and tracks their learning, and support staff can access specialist training through a training request action plan.

Most staff told us they can access a range of learning and development resources. In our staff survey, 65 percent of respondents (120 out of 186) agreed or tended to agree that they could access the right learning and development opportunities when they needed to. This allows them to do their job effectively.

Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity

Adequate

East Sussex 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 EDI. This includes successfully taking steps to remove inequality and making progress to improve fairness, diversity and inclusion at all levels of the service. It should proactively seek and respond to feedback from staff and make sure any action it takes is meaningful.

Area for improvement

The service should make sure that staff are confident using its feedback systems.

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 improved its feedback systems but needs to make sure all staff are confident in them

In our previous inspection, one area for improvement was that the service should make sure that staff are confident using its feedback systems. There has been good progress in this area, but more still needs to be done.

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.

For example:

- It has introduced listening lunches, which give all staff an opportunity to communicate with the chief fire officer.
- There is now a dedicated staff suggestion and ideas space on the intranet.
- It has introduced a confidential reporting line called Say So and updated the whistleblowing policy.
- It gets more staff involved in project work.
- Senior leaders visit different teams face to face.
- Staff surveys are sent out.
- It has introduced on-call forums.

However, during our inspection we found that not all staff are confident in the feedback systems. Only 52 percent of respondents to our staff survey (96 out of 186) told us they were confident in the feedback systems, and only 54 percent (101 out of 186) told us they thought the service kept them informed about matters that affect them.

During our site visits, some on-call staff gave us examples of annual visits being cancelled. Some wholetime staff told us they thought visits were agenda-driven rather than actual engagement. And some support staff told us that they didn't get the same opportunities to engage as operational staff.

The service works well with representative bodies and staff networks including the Fire Brigades Union, UNISON, Fireout, Enable (supporting neurodivergence/disability), and the Gender Inclusion Network to identify and resolve concerns. It has taken action to address matters staff have raised. Examples of this include work carried out on the reasonable adjustment passport, the workwear project and involvement in equipment and vehicle procurement. Staff have welcomed these actions.

The service is tackling unacceptable behaviour

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, 24 percent of respondents (45 out of 186) told us they had been subject to harassment or bullying, and 21 percent of respondents (39 out of 186) told us they had been subject to discrimination over the past 12 months.

Staff told us they are confident in the service's approach to tackling bullying, harassment and discrimination, grievances and disciplinary matters. The service uses discipline and grievance data in conjunction with absence figures and Say So reports to better understand trends and patterns and the workforce's trust and confidence in the processes.

The service has used independent organisations to carry out some of its more complex discipline and grievance cases, to make sure the processes are fair and transparent.

We found widespread understanding and display of the service's values during our inspection and an environment in which staff were willing to challenge unacceptable behaviour.

The service is striving to address potential disproportionality in recruitment and retention

There is an open, fair and honest recruitment process for staff or those wishing to work for the fire and rescue service. The service has an effective system to understand and remove the risk of [disproportionality](#) in recruitment processes. For example, the recruitment policy is supported by an EQIA, and interview panels have HR representation on them. The service has also established a cultural compass advisory group, which is an external group consisting of community leaders and other members of the public, to scrutinise policies and ideas. They examined recruitment and gave feedback which led to changes in the language used in job adverts.

The service has put considerable effort into developing its recruitment processes so that they are fair, and potential applicants can understand them. For example, it has improved the on-call recruitment process. It is now a lot shorter, to recognise the commitments of those applying and attract more applicants by reducing the time between expressing an interest and becoming a firefighter.

The recruitment policies are comprehensive and cover opportunities in all roles. The service advertises recruitment opportunities both internally and externally, and encourages direct entry and the recruitment of non-operational staff into operational roles. The service also offers reasonable adjustments for all recruitment processes, and this is clearly explained on job adverts. This has encouraged applicants from diverse backgrounds, including into middle and senior management roles.

However, the service needs to do more to increase staff diversity. There has been little progress to improve ethnic and gender diversity. As at 31 March 2024, 8.6 percent of new joiners (where ethnicity was known) identified as being from an ethnic minority background. The proportion of firefighters that identified as being from an ethnic minority background has slightly increased from 5.4 percent as at 31 March 2023 to 5.5 percent as at 31 March 2024. But over the same period, the number of people this represents decreased from 30 to 27. The proportion of firefighters who identified as a woman has increased slightly from 9.7 percent to 9.8 percent over the same period. But the number of people this represents decreased from 57 to 54.

For the whole workforce, as at 31 March 2024, 6.4 percent identified as being from an ethnic minority background compared to 15.5 percent in the service's local population and 8.6 percent throughout all fire and rescue services in England. In the service, 21.2 percent identified as a woman, compared to an average of 20.2 percent throughout all fire and rescue services in England.

The service has improved its approach to EDI

The service has improved its approach to EDI. It makes sure it can offer the right services to its communities and can support staff with [protected characteristics](#). It has a good strategic direction for this work. It has an inclusion lead who sits on a strategic EDI group, chaired by the senior leadership team and attended by the staff network groups. The inclusion lead is also part of the external cultural compass advisory group and attends staff network group meetings to support them and help form the agenda for the strategic meetings. The service also has a dedicated EDI page on the intranet that contains a range of resources and templates to support staff.

Staff complete e-learning annually, and there has also been a programme of face-to-face learning across the service since our last inspection. We saw positive attitudes towards EDI on the stations that we visited, with staff displaying an understanding of and willingness to discuss EDI-related matters. There was particular praise for the HeForShe initiative, which promotes and supports gender equality through quarterly meetings. And externally the service engages enthusiastically around EDI through:

- the Asian Fire Service Association;
- Women in the Fire Service UK;
- the NFCC; and
- neighbouring services.

It has an effective process in place to assess equality impact and acts as needed to improve equality. It continues to improve this process and its implementation through e-learning, externally provided training and the development of an EQIA register. All new policies and procedures, and any changes, have an EQIA completed which is live for six weeks for feedback before being signed off and added to the register. The service has also set up a review group which will consider recent EQIAs. Staff network groups and all staff wanting to submit an EQIA will be involved through a series of workshops.

Managing performance and developing leaders

Good

East Sussex 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 individuals' performance well

The service has a good performance management system in place, which allows it to effectively assess and develop the individual performance of all staff. It has a rolling review cycle of regular one-to-one meetings for all staff with their line manager. There is also one longer annual meeting for staff members to cover formal objective setting and aligning their work with organisational strategy.

In our staff survey, 84 percent of respondents (157 out of 186) told us they had had a formal personal development review or appraisal in the past 12 months. Most staff we spoke to told us they felt the appraisal process was meaningful and contributed to their development and performance.

This picture was further supported by operational, non-operational and departmental staff that we spoke to during our inspection, who confirmed this process was happening, with most viewing it as positive. Each staff member has individual goals and objectives, and regular performance assessments. Staff feel confident in the performance and development arrangements in place and that they offer the opportunity for development to be achieved and poor performance to be managed appropriately.

The service's promotion processes are fair, but it needs to do more to assure staff of this

The service has put considerable effort into developing its promotion and progression processes so that they are fair, and all staff can understand them. In our review, we found a process with clear and objective selection criteria. Interview questions are based on the leadership behaviour framework and linked to the selection criteria. And reasonable adjustments are offered for all promotion processes, through HR, with internal candidates able to share their adjustment passports.

The promotion and progression policies are comprehensive and cover opportunities in all roles, for example pathways for on-call firefighters to transition to the wholetime duty system, and support staff developing and progressing through secondment opportunities and project work. The service manages those selection processes consistently. It uses a talent pool system to fill gaps and there is HR involvement in all pool recruitment to create consistent moderation. It also uses temporary promotions appropriately to fill short-term resourcing gaps.

At the time of our inspection, the service had just appointed a new chief fire officer, and the process was facilitated by an external company to create transparency and fairness.

While the results from our review indicated a fair and open process was in place, only 44 percent of respondents to our staff survey (81 out of 186) agreed that the promotion process in the service was fair. And only 47 percent (87 out of 186) felt they were given the same opportunities to develop as other staff. The service needs to get a better understanding of why some staff feel the promotion process is unfair.

The service is working to improve the diversity of its leadership

The service knows it needs to go further to increase workforce diversity, especially in middle and senior management. It has put in place plans to address this. These include external advertisement of positions through the NFCC, local councils, national newspapers and networking groups such as Women in the Fire Service UK. They also use independent recruitment agencies.

The service has had a direct entry process in place for some time and it also allows non-operational staff members to move into operational roles and progress through the service.

The service is improving how it develops and supports high-potential staff

The service has effective succession-planning processes in place, which allow it to manage high-potential staff into leadership roles. It offers secondment opportunities to support the development of staff into roles. And it has put individuals through coaching and mentoring programmes and internal leadership programmes.

The service is developing a talent management toolkit. It has carried out a critical role analysis exercise, to identify gaps and potential gaps and support its implementation. The service currently uses the promotion pool process to do this in terms of individuals and skills but will use the toolkit once it is approved by the senior leadership team. We look forward to seeing the impact this has on the service.

The service has considered the December 2022 Leading the Service and Leading and Developing People fire standards and how it will implement them. The service told us it is fully compliant with the Leading and Developing People standard, and it has started work on the Leading the Service standard. It is mostly compliant, although there is still some more work to be done.

