

Fire & Rescue Service 2023–25

Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of Kent Fire and Rescue Service

Contents

Changes to this round of inspection	1
Overall summary	2
Service in numbers	4
Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies	6
Innovative practice	6
Main findings	6
Preventing fires and other risks	10
Area for improvement	10
Promising practice	10
Main findings	11
Protecting the public through fire regulation	15
Main findings	15
Responding to fires and other emergencies	19
Area for improvement	19
Main findings	19
Responding to major and multi-agency incidents	24
Main findings	24
Making best use of resources	29
Area for improvement	29
Main findings	29
Making the fire and rescue service affordable now and in the future	33
Promising practice	33
Main findings	34

Promoting the right values and culture	37
Main findings	37
Getting the right people with the right skills	40
Promising practice	40
Main findings	41
Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity	43
Areas for improvement	43
Promising practice	43
Main findings	44
Managing performance and developing leaders	47
Area for improvement	47
Main findings	47

Changes to this round of inspection

We last inspected Kent Fire and Rescue Service in July 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 Kent 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 Kent 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	Preventing fire and risk	Responding to fires and emergencies		
Public safety through fire regulation	Responding to major incidents	Promoting fairness and diversity		
Future affordability	Best use of resources	Managing performance and developing leaders		
	Promoting values and culture			
	Right people, right skills			

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

I congratulate Kent Fire and Rescue Service on its performance in keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks.

I was pleased to see that the service has maintained its high performance in some areas since [our last inspection in July 2022](#). It has made progress in others. For example, the service has improved how it protects the public through fire regulation. And it has maintained its outstanding performance in understanding risk and managing the future affordability of the service.

However, the service could improve in some areas. For example, it could quality assure prevention activity by operational crews more robustly. It could manage promotion and recruitment processes better. And some staff told us they weren't confident in using feedback systems to report inappropriate behaviour.

My main findings from this inspection are as follows:

- The service is outstanding in how it understands, collects and uses community risk information to make sure staff are well prepared to respond to incidents.
- The service is outstanding at protecting the public through regulation of fire safety.
- The service also shows outstanding future financial planning to make sure it is affordable and sustainable now and in the future, and maintains value for money through detailed project planning and monitoring.
- The service has well defined values and a positive working culture where equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) are recognised and understood by everyone.
- The service needs to do more to improve the availability of its on-call response.
- The service should make sure all staff feel confident raising concerns.

Overall, I commend the service on its strong performance. However, in this report we highlight some areas for improvement. I look forward to seeing the service make progress in these areas.



Roy Wilsher

HM Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Service in numbers



Profile

	Kent	England
Area Square miles	1,444	50,370
Population (thousands) 30 June 2023	1,897	57,690
Population density Thousands per square mile	1.3	1.1



Cost

Funding Year ending 31 March 2023	£81.3m	£2.5bn
Expenditure per population Year ending 31 March 2023	£48.06	£46.66

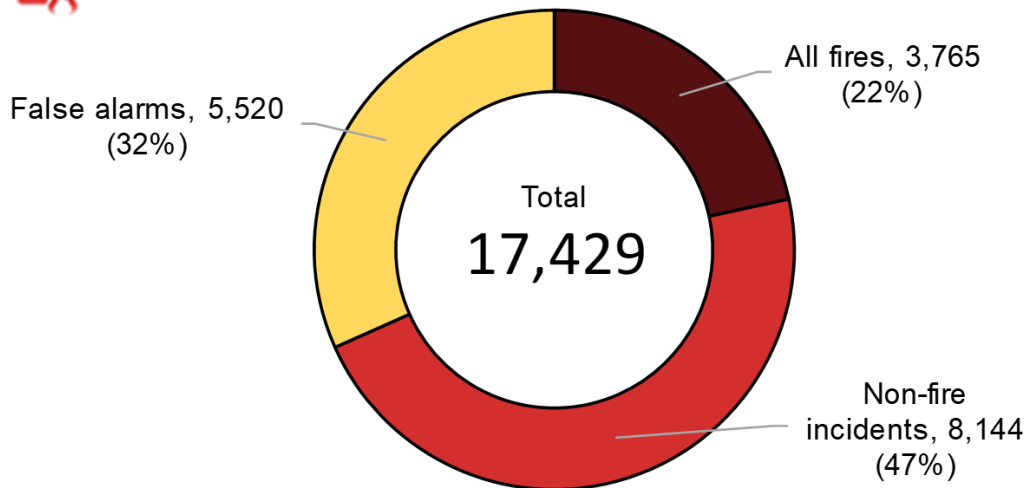


Response

Incidents attended per 1,000 population Year ending 30 September 2024	9.2	10.4
Home fire safety visits carried out by fire and rescue service per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2024	18.8	9.8
Fire safety audits per 100 known premises Year ending 31 March 2024	5.5	2.0
Availability of wholetime pumps Year ending 31 March 2024	96.5%	
Availability of on-call pumps Year ending 31 March 2024	33.9%	



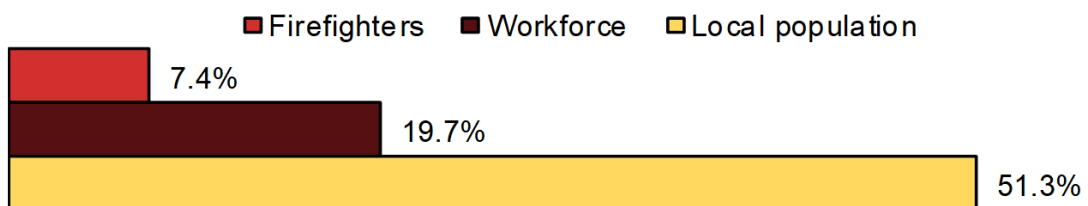
Incidents attended in year ending 30 September 2024



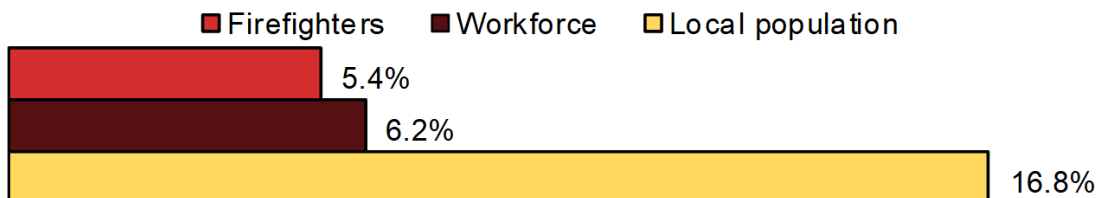
Workforce

	Kent	England
Five-year change in total workforce 2019 to 2024	7.2%	1.9%
Number of firefighters per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2024	0.60	0.60
Percentage of firefighters who are wholetime Year ending 31 March 2024	60.4%	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

Outstanding

Kent Fire and Rescue Service is outstanding at understanding risk.

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

Innovative practice

The service has invested in 3D cameras to better understand high-risk sites

The service uses 3D cameras to scan and create models and images of high-risk premises to improve staff's awareness of significant risks and crew safety.

The risk information team can include the 3D models in site-specific risk information. This allows incident commanders to virtually walk through premises. The service can also use the 3D models to familiarise crews with buildings without them having to visit.

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 analyses a range of information to identify current and future risks

The service has assessed a suitable range of risks and threats using a thorough community risk management planning process. It uses information it has collected from a broad range of internal and external sources and datasets. This includes [Mosaic data](#), incident data, equality data and response times. This data allows the service to group risk into five categories to profile vulnerability. The service produces heat maps to highlight areas of risk and target prevention and protection activities. It has risk profiles for individual stations.

When appropriate, 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, the service's dedicated community insights and partnership team has targeted seldom-heard groups to increase their awareness of risk.

The service told us that it consulted over 1,800 people in its 2025–29 [community risk management plan \(CRMP\)](#) process. This was five times greater than the previous CRMP consultation process. It also worked with partner organisations, such as local councils, to build a comprehensive understanding of their risk profile. The CRMP was peer-reviewed by another fire and rescue service before publication.

The service uses a wide range of data to make sure it is identifying and mitigating future and emerging risks. It identifies trends early through a monthly meeting. We saw evidence of public consultations and awareness sessions on emerging risks such as lithium-ion batteries.

The service has an effective CRMP

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

The plan's seven key strategic areas are:

- climate change and environment;
- health and society;
- rescues;
- major industry;
- buildings and places;
- transport; and
- utilities, fuel, and power.

Each area of focus has key performance indicators to measure success and maintain accountability. The service reviews its CRMP every year.

The service effectively gathers, maintains and shares a wide 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. Operational crews visit, and gather and share information. These are known as 'response assessment visits – intelligence' (RAV-Int). The central risk information team can then produce a site-specific risk information (SSRI) document. Crews access this on their [mobile data terminals](#).

The service manages this process well. We found 459 SSRI documents on its database, all reviewed within the service's timeframe. Operational crew follow-up activity is dictated by the level of risk identified. This could be a familiarisation visit, a tabletop exercise or a full exercise.

We sampled a broad range of the risk information the service collects, including:

- SSRI;
- [safe and well visit](#) files;
- [home fire safety visit](#) files;
- protection files; and
- short-term/temporary 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, the service updates mobile data terminals with new SSRI daily. It adds risk summaries immediately when needed. [Fire control](#) can add additional information to highlight short-term risks, such as oxygen storage.

The service can integrate the work of different sections through its new Dynamics software. It showed us an example where prevention, protection and response teams logged 166 interactions for one location. Where appropriate, the service shares risk information with other organisations, such as neighbouring fire and rescue services, the police, South East Coast Ambulance Service, HM Coastguard, local councils and Trading Standards.

Staff at the locations we visited, including firefighters and fire control operators, were able to show us that they could access, use and share risk information quickly to help resolve incidents safely. Operational crews also have a tablet so they can access risk information remotely.

The service uses learning from operational activity to build a comprehensive 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, the service told us of its protection and prevention teams' ongoing work with business owners around battery energy storage systems, solar panels and lithium-ion batteries.

The service's community insights and partnership team monitors trends and future challenges.

The service is investing in technology to improve its ability to gather and record risk information

The service has invested in 3D camera technology to provide staff across different sections with full colour, detailed internal premises risk awareness. The cameras can scan a room, walkway or corridor so staff can virtually walk through the premises. The service will use this to improve response teams' risk and situational awareness. It can share the models with other responding emergency services.

The service will attach the 3D models to SSRI documents and make them accessible on mobile data terminals and tablets. It can also use the models for site familiarisation and training. We look forward to seeing this initiative develop.

Overall, Kent Fire and Rescue Service has maintained its excellent performance in understanding risk. However, it should continue to consider how it can effectively use new systems and processes, such as the 3D cameras and its risk-based intervention programme, to continue to improve.

Preventing fires and other risks

Good

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

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

Area for improvement

The service should make sure its quality assures all of its prevention activity, so staff carry out [home fire safety visits](#) to an appropriate standard.

Promising practice

The service has adapted its prevention work for children and young people with additional needs

Kent Fire and Rescue Service carries out prevention and awareness work in schools for pupils with special educational needs using visual prompts. In March 2025, the service had logged 18 visits since September 2024.

The service works with the schools to provide appropriate materials for pupils' needs. The education team also uses Picture Exchange Communication System pictures to communicate with non-verbal [children](#).

This is a positive way of providing important fire safety awareness to children and young people with additional needs.

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

Main findings

The service's prevention strategy directs activity to the most vulnerable

The service's prevention strategy is clearly linked to the risks it has identified in its CRMP and 10-year customer safety plan 2021–31. Prevention specialists, education teams and operational crews carry out a range of prevention activities. These include safe and well visits, home fire safety visits, school programmes and arson-reduction activities.

The service's teams work well together and with other organisations on prevention. They share relevant information when needed. In the year ending 31 March 2024, the service received 6,370 referrals from other agencies, although we did hear that some referrals lacked consistency in detail and vulnerability information.

The service uses information to adjust its planning assumptions and direct activity between its prevention, protection and response functions. For example, the service told us about activities with communities concerned about the impact of lithium-ion batteries and safe storage of e-scooters and e-bikes.

A home fire safety visit task force team carries out prevention activities in rural, isolated and harder-to-reach areas.

In the year ending 31 March 2024, the service completed 18.8 home fire safety visits per 1,000 population, which is higher than the England rate of 10.4.

The service is part of the [National Fire Chiefs Council \(NFCC\)](#) prevention structure, showing its strong alignment with national guidance. It actively contributes to national prevention initiatives.

The service targets prevention activity at people most at risk

The service uses a risk-based approach to clearly prioritise its prevention activity towards people most at risk from fire and other emergencies. For example, the service prioritises referrals and a specialist prevention officer visits people considered high or medium priority. Operational crews or the home fire safety visit task force team visits standard priority people.

The service uses a broad range of information and data to target its prevention activity at [vulnerable people](#) and groups. This includes Mosaic and incident data, which the service uses to highlight vulnerable people and high priority areas. Stations use this information to target activity. But staff told us of a few examples where the vulnerability/risk level didn't accurately reflect the people in the premises.

In the year ending 31 March 2024, the service completed 20,342 prevention visits, which were targeted through its vulnerability data model.

Staff are well trained to provide prevention advice and support

Staff told us they have the right skills and confidence to carry out prevention visits appropriate to the risk level. Both safe and well visits and home fire safety visits cover an appropriate range of hazards that can put vulnerable people at greater risk from fire and other emergencies.

Staff can offer advice on electrical safety, safer heating, home fire detection, safe smoking and general fire safety, including planning exit routes. They can refer the homeowner for a specialist visit from the prevention team if they have concerns beyond their knowledge level.

The service responds well to safeguarding concerns

Staff we interviewed told us about occasions when they had identified [safeguarding](#) problems. They told us they feel confident and trained to act appropriately and promptly. They understand the process for raising a safeguarding concern, which follows a simple flow chart. The service provides staff with face-to-face training and e-learning modules. It always has a designated safeguarding officer, trained to level 3 as a minimum, available to support staff.

The service has a safeguarding competency framework in place for all staff that is relevant to their role. The service told us that it was an active member of the Kent and Medway Safeguarding Adults Board, which is used to share best practice and align risk awareness.

The service works well with partners to target the most vulnerable people

The community insights and partnership team works with a wide range of organisations to prevent fires and other emergencies. These include memorandums of understanding with the NHS, Age UK and Southern Gas Networks.

The service told us about additional activities, such as suicide prevention on a bridge in Medway with Samaritans. The service links into 13 different safeguarding boards and meetings and is an active member of the Kent Community Safety Partnership.

The service has a positive working relationship with partner organisations. In the year ending 31 March 2024, it carried out 6,370 visits in response to referrals from other agencies. But we found limited evidence that it referred vulnerable people to other organisations when it couldn't meet their needs. In the year ending 31 March 2024, it completed 35,729 safe and well visits and home fire safety visits, but only recorded 378 referrals to other organisations.

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's Aspire programme promotes safer behaviours for young people aged 11–17 years.

This programme is supported by agencies such as child-centred policing teams, Medway Youth and the Young Lives Foundation.

The service is tackling fire-setting behaviour and providing education about arson

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 a dedicated education team trained to work with young people who show signs of fire-setting behaviour.

The service can receive referrals from parents, carers, local councils and police. The education team provides talks in secondary schools to highlight the consequences of arson. Between 1 September 2024 and 31 March 2025, the service recorded 79 fire-setting interventions, with 51 young people referred onwards to a fire-setting programme.

When appropriate, it routinely shares information with relevant organisations to support the prosecution of arsonists.

Operational crews' prevention activity isn't consistently evaluated

We found limited evidence that the service evaluates its activity or makes sure all its communities get appropriate access to prevention activity that meets their needs.

For example, after operational crews carry out prevention activity, the service asks homeowners to complete a survey to see if their behaviour and understanding of fire risks has improved. Between 1 April and 30 June 2024, the service received 249 responses. Between 1 July and 30 September 2024, the service received 182 responses. The service told us this was a response rate of 3–4 percent.

The education team uses an online evaluation tool called Impactasaurus, but we saw little evidence of change made as a result.

We saw examples where the service had quality assured and evaluated safeguarding referrals to make sure it had offered enough support. It checks the quality of specialist prevention teams' activities consistently. But the service doesn't have a robust process to check the quality of operational crews' prevention work. The service told us it will introduce this in 2025 and we look forward to seeing its impact.

The service must make sure it identifies all opportunities to improve its prevention work for the public. A consistent quality assurance process will make sure the information and advice provided by crews are relevant and up to date, and result in people feeling safer in their homes.

The service education team is working well to identify and support harder-to-reach young people.

It has effectively grouped education establishments by risk. This has allowed the service to target activities at schools with special educational need provision and pupil referral units.

The service uses a bespoke toolkit of resources including Picture Exchange Communication System tags to communicate with non-verbal children to share key safety messages. The service told us that between 1 September 2024 and 31 March 2025, it visited 18 special educational need provisions and 4 pupil referral unit provisions.

The service is also trialling a Fire Cadets Challenge with four Medway secondary schools over a six to eight-week period. It will work with 87 young people identified by their school as being at risk or requiring additional support. The service aims to support young people to develop resilience and strategies to navigate risk.

Protecting the public through fire regulation

Outstanding

Kent Fire and Rescue Service is outstanding at protecting the public through fire regulation.

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

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 a clear strategy that directs protection work

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

Staff across the service take part, effectively exchanging information as needed. As mentioned in the [Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies section](#), operational crews routinely carry out RAV-Int visits, which the risk information team shares with protection where necessary.

The service then uses information to adjust planning assumptions and direct activity between its protection, prevention and response functions. This means resources are properly aligned to risk. The service shares information on its Dynamics system, which is accessible to all staff.

The service makes sure it effectively aligns activity with risk

The service focuses its risk-based inspection programme on the service's highest-risk buildings.

It has identified 13,280 high-risk premises. It has reviewed data to reduce the number to 2,580 considered high or very high risk. It audits all these premises over

a three-year cycle. The service completed its risk-based inspection programme and introduced a new risk-based intervention programme from 1 April 2025.

The service had completed all files to a high standard and within the timeframe it had set itself.

The service completes fire safety audits to a high standard

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

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

The service had completed them to a high standard, in a consistent, systematic way and in line with its policies. It makes relevant information from its audits available to operational teams and fire control operators.

The service has a robust process to check the quality of fire safety work

The service carries out proportionate checks on the quality of its protection activity. It subjects 30 percent of all activity to a robust quality assurance process. At the time of our inspection, the service had recorded 345 quality checks for fire safety audits carried out in 2024/25.

It has good evaluation tools to measure how effective its activity is and to make sure all sections of its communities get appropriate access to the protection services that meet their needs.

The service carries out fire safety audits in line with its enforcement plan. Inspection officers show a clear understanding of risk. The service uses NFCC guidance for inspections, and schedules peer reviews with other fire and rescue services.

The service uses its full range of enforcement powers

The service consistently uses its full range of enforcement powers, and when appropriate, it prosecutes those who don't comply with fire safety regulations.

The service uses an enforcement model to maintain consistency, and all this activity is reviewed at an enforcement steering group meeting.

In the year ending 31 March 2024, the service issued 2 alteration notices, 860 informal notifications, 56 enforcement notices and 26 prohibition notices. It carried out one prosecution. It completed five prosecutions in the five years from 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2024.

The service regularly reviews progress made by businesses subject to enforcement action.

Fire safety teams are well resourced and trained for their roles

The service has enough qualified protection staff to meet the requirements of its risk-based inspection programme.

As at 31 March 2024, the protection department had 29 competent staff who had a level 4 diploma in fire safety, and an additional 15 staff in development. A further 18 people throughout the service hold a level 4 diploma in fire safety to provide additional resilience if needed. This helps the service provide the audit and enforcement activity needed, both now and in the future.

Staff get the right training and work to appropriate accreditation. The service showed us evidence of ongoing [continuing professional development \(CPD\)](#) for all fire safety staff.

The service also offers 24-hour support from a protection specialist, which is available to support operational crews or partner agencies, such as the local authority and Trading Standards, if required.

The service has adapted well to new legislation

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

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

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

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

The service works well with other enforcement agencies

The service works closely with other enforcement agencies to regulate fire safety and it routinely exchanges risk information with them. This includes joint enforcement activities with:

- police;
- the Health and Safety Executive;
- the Food Standards Agency; and

- local councils.

The service responds to building consultations in a timely manner

The service responds to building consultations on time. This means it consistently meets its statutory responsibility to comment on fire safety arrangements at new and altered buildings. We found an improvement in its response rate from 96.7 percent (2,396 out of 2,479) in 2022/23 to 99.5 percent (2,279 out of 2,291) in 2023/24.

Its response to licensing consultations was lower. The service has identified a reporting issue and rectified it.

The service works well with businesses to promote compliance with fire safety legislation

The service proactively works with businesses and other organisations to promote compliance with fire safety legislation. A dedicated team provides training for businesses and raises awareness. The service told us that since January 2024, it had held 10 training events with over 150 attendees.

The service is also a [primary authority](#) to a number of education institutions and businesses nationally, including University of Kent, Canterbury Christ Church University, Leigh Academies Trust, Demelza Hospice Care, Golding Homes, mhs homes and Shepherd Neame pubs.

Unwanted fire signals are still increasing, but the service is working to reduce them

Fire control has an effective process to challenge calls for service. This has significantly reduced the proportion of automatic fire alarms (AFAs) the service is responding to.

In the year ending 31 March 2024, the service received 12,761 AFA requests. This was an increase from 7,585 the previous year. But in the year ending 31 March 2024, the proportion of AFAs not attended was 72.7 percent, an increase from 62.1 percent the previous year.

In the year to 30 September 2023, the service attended 2.9 incidents that were false alarms per 1,000 population. In the year to 30 September 2024, the rate remained the same and was lower than the England rate of 4.4.

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.

We also heard of 'AFA action days' where the business safety team worked with prevention and response colleagues to target businesses experiencing a high number of unwanted fire signals. At an AFA action day at a care home, staff reviewed and changed some detector heads to make them more appropriate.

Responding to fires and other emergencies

Adequate

Kent 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.

Area for improvement

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

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 uses delivery plans to direct operational response, but it could improve how it measures success

The service's 2025–29 CRMP has identified seven strategic priorities. Each priority has areas of focus that the service is committed to monitoring and improving.

The service has detailed delivery and enabling plans for each priority, stating how the service will reduce impact and how it will respond to keep people safe.

The service publicises the performance indicators it uses to monitor success. We found that these could have been more specific, with clearer measures of success. The service should use performance indicators to maintain accountability to the public and make sure it is achieving its strategic priorities.

The service hasn't fully reviewed its operating model since 2012

The service told us that it regularly monitored whether stations were in the best location and response run times. But it also told us that it last carried out a detailed review of its operating model in 2012. The service should use internal and externally available data to test assumptions and planning to maximise its operational effectiveness.

During our inspection, we identified several on-call stations struggling to have a fire engine available for more than 20 percent of the time.

At the time of our inspection, the service's predetermined response to a [dwelling fire](#) was to send two fire engines, regardless of the nature of the fire. For example, the policy doesn't state that more fire engines should be sent if people are trapped. Most fire and rescue services automatically deploy three fire engines if people are reported to be trapped.

The service has empowered fire control operators to increase the response on the strength of the information received. The service told us that this improved efficiency in [mobilising](#) fire engines. But it relies on the quality of the information the call handler receives.

From 1 April 2024 to 28 February 2025, the service told us that it had responded to 624 dwelling fires. Of these, 90 were considered to need more than 2 fire engines.

Fire control increased the response on 25 occasions. But on 48 occasions the request for more fire engines came from the incident location, when the incident commander considered the initial deployment wasn't enough.

The average time for the third fire engine to arrive at the incident was 16 minutes after being mobilised. If requested, it took on average 21 minutes for a fourth fire engine to arrive.

The service didn't always meet its response standards but has implemented new ones

There are no national response standards of performance for the public. But the service has set out its own response standards in its CRMP. The service doesn't always meet its standards.

In the year ending 31 March 2024, the service committed to:

- reach life-threatening incidents in 10 minutes on 71 percent of occasions, but achieved 66.6 percent;
- reach life-threatening incidents in 12 minutes on 82 percent of occasions, but achieved 77.8 percent; and
- reach non-life-threatening incidents in 15 minutes on 92 percent of occasions, but achieved 88 percent.

Home Office data shows that in that period, the service's response time to [primary fires](#) was 10 minutes and 57 seconds. This is slower than the average for predominantly rural services, which is 10 minutes and 16 seconds.

The service has recognised this delay and set a new response standard depending on location. From 1 April 2025, the service aims to respond to an incident in an urban area within 9 minutes on 75 percent of occasions, and in a rural area within 15 minutes on 75 percent of occasions.

On-call fire engine availability is particularly low

Fire cover is being affected by the lack of on-call availability. In the year ending 31 March 2024, on-call availability was 33.9 percent. This figure has been relatively stable since 2021/22, but in the year ending 31 March 2024, it reduced the overall availability of fire engines to 55.6 percent.

We recognise that, at the time of our inspection, the service was carrying out a major corporate project to better understand the barriers to recruiting on-call firefighters. However, it must do more to improve on-call availability.

To support its response plan, the service aims to have 32 fire engines available for day cover between 9am and 6pm. It aims to have 44 fire engines available between 6pm and 9am for evening cover. The service told us that between April and August 2024, it was consistently operating close to this number, with an average of 31 fire engines available during the day and 45 during evenings.

The service has robust incident command arrangements

The service has incident commanders it has trained and assesses regularly and properly. As at 31 March 2024, all 353 incident commanders were accredited through Skills for Justice and had a robust two-year revalidation process. The service follows the [national operational guidance](#) core competency framework from level 1 to level 4. This helps the service safely and effectively manage all the incidents it could face, from small and routine ones to complex multi-agency incidents.

The service gives newly qualified incident commanders additional support and a mentor for their initial incidents. It encourages incident commanders to log 20 hours of command hours per year to maintain their skills.

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

The service includes fire control staff in exercises and incident command

We were pleased to see the service's control staff integrated into its command, training, exercise, debrief and assurance activity. At the time of our inspection, one member of staff had recently returned from a secondment on national operational guidance and was making sure that all fire control processes were fully aligned with national guidance.

Fire control operators are often recognised as the first incident commander. They are empowered to increase the number of fire engines attending an incident on the strength of information received.

The service is joining the networked fire services partnership with Hampshire and Isle of Wight, Devon and Somerset, and Dorset and Wiltshire fire and rescue services to buy a new mobilising system. It expects that, from July 2027, the services in the partnership will be able to take calls for each other and mobilise their resources to respond. We look forward to seeing how this improves service to the public.

Risk information is readily available and easily accessible

We sampled a range of risk information on the service's central database and mobile data terminals. This included information for firefighters responding to incidents at high-risk, high-rise buildings and information held by fire control.

The information was up to date and detailed. Staff could easily access and understand it. Encouragingly, the service has consulted with its prevention, protection and response functions where appropriate. Incident commanders, firefighters and fire control operators are able to access relevant risk information. The service has made risk summaries available on mobile data terminals and tablets for quick access.

The service has a robust process to evaluate operational performance

As part of the inspection, we reviewed a range of emergency incidents and training events. These include significant fires in domestic and commercial premises, as well as specialist rescues.

We were pleased to see the service routinely follows its policies to make sure that staff command incidents in line with national operational guidance. It updates internal risk information with the information it receives.

The service learns from incidents to improve its service for the public. For example, a member of the public collided with the rear of a fire engine at an incident. The service recognised that it could make the rear of fire engines more visible, and LED lighting is being installed to improve firefighter safety.

The service shared with us another example of learning from a cross-border incident where a height vehicle was requested. The service will now mobilise a supporting fire engine due to differences in breathing apparatus procedures. It has added this change to fire control's mobilising instructions and updated procedures.

The service adds actions from debriefs to an 'operational learning tracker', accessible by all, to monitor progress.

The service is contributing towards, and acting on, learning from other fire and rescue services or operational learning gathered from emergency service partners. The operational learning manager is the single point of contact for sharing learning nationally through [national operational learning \(NOL\)](#) and [joint organisational learning \(JOL\)](#). At the time of our inspection, the service told us about four recent submissions to NOL to share learning nationally.

The service's assistant director of customer and building safety is the NFCC prevention learning lead for the organisational learning board. The service also has representation on learning forums, such as the NFCC south-eastern region forum.

The service feeds all learning from incidents, debriefs, NOL and JOL into its integrated learning and assurance model (ILAM). The service uses this to make sure it gathers learning and includes it in the provision of new training where needed.

The engagement team makes sure the public is informed of ongoing incidents

The service has good systems in place to inform the public about ongoing incidents and help keep them safe during and after incidents. The engagement team is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to support staff. It has access to a range of media platforms to share messages as widely as possible. The service is also aware that some people don't use social media. So it will use volunteers at incidents to warn and inform residents in person.

The service provides incident commanders at level 2 and above with regular media training.

Responding to major and multi-agency incidents

Good

Kent Fire and Rescue Service is good at responding to major and multi-agency incidents.

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

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

Main findings

The service has well-established plans to prepare for major and multi-agency incidents

The service has effectively considered and planned for the reasonably foreseeable risks and threats it may face. It lists these risks in local and national risk registers as part of its CRMP.

For example, the service risk register identifies a number of risk types that could affect the service. These include service delivery, workforce, financial, governance, property and information. The service assesses all risks and acts to mitigate or reduce the risk where possible.

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.

In January 2025, the service entered an agreement with Surrey, East Sussex and West Sussex fire and rescue services (known as the 4F group) to share risk information and carry out joint training and exercises against their highest-risk premises. We look forward to seeing this group develop.

Firefighters have access to risk information from neighbouring services. This includes risks that are up to 10 km outside the service's borders with the 4F services, and 5 km outside its border with London Fire Brigade.

Risk information is shared through [Resilience Direct](#). Crews can access it on mobile data terminals and tablets.

The service is well prepared to respond to a fire in a tall building

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 has well-developed policies and procedures in place for safely managing this type of incident. Staff at all levels understand them. We were pleased to see the service had tested them through robust training and exercises. The service told us that in the year ending 31 March 2024, it had carried out 33 tall building exercises.

At this type of incident, a fire and rescue service would receive a high volume of simultaneous fire calls. The service uses an electronic system to manage and share information at an incident. We identified some issues with the persons-at-risk spreadsheet. This resulted in a delay in sharing of key information. However, the service has tested the process, and staff showed competence in its use.

We found that the service's systems are robust enough to receive and manage high call volumes. Staff at the incident and in supporting control rooms can view, share and update instructions based on information received from individual fire calls.

The service works well with other fire and rescue services

The service supports other fire and rescue services responding to emergency incidents. For example, the service is working with neighbouring fire and rescue services to maximise intraoperability and understand gaps or differences in equipment and processes.

The service told us about its joint procurement of incident command units and breathing apparatus with the neighbouring 4F services to improve response.

The service has successfully supported other services with national assets, such as high-volume pumps. It has effective plans for this to happen. It mobilises an officer to provide operational and welfare support to crews deployed across its border.

The service no longer has a first line of response contract for the Channel Tunnel. However, it continues to work very closely with French colleagues to make sure it maintains an effective response for incidents at the tunnel.

The service's cross-border exercises plan maximises joint working opportunities

The service has a cross-border exercise plan with neighbouring fire and rescue services, helping them work together effectively to keep the public safe. The plan includes the risks of major events at which the service could foreseeably give support or ask for help from neighbouring services.

We were pleased to see the service uses feedback from these exercises to inform risk information and service plans. The 4F group agreement will make this more formalised. The service is an active participant in the Kent and Medway [Resilience Forum](#)'s operational response and resilience group to help the co-ordination and management of cross-border exercises.

The service told us about a joint marauding terrorist attack exercise planned with West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service and an exercise at Bluewater shopping centre with London Fire Brigade in June 2025.

The service has trained most incident commanders in the use of JESIP

Most incident commanders we interviewed had been trained in and were familiar with JESIP. However, some level 1 and level 2 commanders we spoke to weren't clear about major incident definitions and their responsibilities when declaring a major incident.

At the time of our inspection, the service told us it had been trialling a new JESIP training course with police and ambulance colleagues throughout 2024. The course is ongoing in 2025 and trains up to 40 incident commanders at each event.

The service provides commanders with access to e-learning packages to refresh their knowledge and understanding. The service provides level 4 commanders with multi-agency gold incident command training.

The service uses the [M/ETHANE](#) model to share messages across control rooms in an agreed format so everyone understands what is happening.

We sampled a range of debriefs the service had carried out after multi-agency incidents and exercises. We were encouraged to find that the service is identifying any problems it has with applying JESIP and taking appropriate, prompt action with other emergency services. We were pleased to hear that partner organisations, including other emergency services and key stakeholders such as building owners or local authorities where necessary, were always included in [hot debriefs](#). The service invites them to attend structured debriefs and share their feedback.

The service works effectively with other organisations and partners

The service has good arrangements in place to respond to emergencies with partner organisations that make up the Kent and Medway Resilience Forum. These include a quarterly level 4 major incident training exercise including representatives from the local resilience forum's operational response and resilience group.

The service is a valued partner in the forum and contributes to the different sub-groups within it. It takes part in regular training events with other forum members, such as local councils or utility companies. It uses the learning to develop planning assumptions about responding to major and multi-agency incidents. The service showed us evidence of a number of exercises at locations including hospitals, National Trust venues, airports and power stations.

The service considers and shares national learning

The service makes sure it knows about national operational updates from other fire and rescue services and JOL from other organisations, such as the police and ambulance trusts.

It uses this learning to inform planning assumptions that it makes with partner organisations. The operational learning manager evaluates NOL and JOL updates. They allocate the content and use a red, amber or green rating to make sure the service applies any intervention needed in a timely manner.

The operational learning team records the learning and what action the service needs to take on to an operational learning tracker for monitoring. The service puts the learning through its ILAM, a process that makes sure policies, procedures and training are updated to reflect the learning.

The service shares its learning nationally. At the time of our inspection, it was able to show us four recent examples of NOL submissions including learning about Careline providers, [operational discretion](#) in water and lithium-ion battery awareness. The service's operational learning manager attends NFCC regional and national forums.

Service-wide awareness of marauding terrorist attack policy could be improved

The service has staff with specialist training in responding to a marauding terrorist attack. It could provide at least 12 specialist responders to a reported attack. We were told of the regular training events and ongoing CPD led by service [national inter-agency liaison officers](#). This includes police firearms teams and ambulance colleagues.

The specialist teams are well trained and prepared. But operational crews have less understanding of what they would need to do in a marauding terrorist attack. The service told us it provided e-learning and had increased the focus on these attacks in training and exercises. However, staff's understanding of the process they should follow was inconsistent.

Making best use of resources

Good

Kent Fire and Rescue Service is good at making best use of its resources.

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

The service's revenue budget for 2025/26 is £98.23 million. This is a 5 percent increase from the previous financial year.

Area for improvement

The service should assure itself that its response cover, including its mix of crewing and duty systems, provides the most effective and efficient response 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's financial and workforce plans are effective, but on-call availability remains low

The service's financial and workforce plans, including allocating resources to prevention, protection and response, are mostly consistent with the risks and priorities it has identified in its CRMP.

We found the service had an effective workforce planning model, led by an establishment board. The service shares workforce planning information with the corporate management board to highlight vacant positions now and in 6 months' and 12 months' time. The service updates its workforce plan every two years. This process makes sure the service has enough resources allocated to prevention, protection and response.

The service told us that it had carried out some review work on its fire cover model, but that a full review hadn't been completed since 2012. Some of its on-call fire engines are rarely available to respond to incidents. It manages availability through its central resourcing team, using a flexible resourcing system. It can access availability data for each 30-minute period throughout the day.

But in the year to 31 March 2024, the service only achieved its on-call availability target at one station. Its overall availability for the period was 55.6 percent, with [wholetime](#) availability at 96.5 percent and on-call availability at 33.9 percent. And between 2021/22 and 2023/24, the service underspent its on-call firefighter budget by around £3.3 million.

The service told us that it was reviewing its on-call duty system, including recruitment, retention and training. The service would benefit from also carrying out a fire cover review to check its response cover, including its mix of crewing and duty systems, provides the most effective and efficient response for the public.

The service builds its plans on sound scenarios. They help make sure the service is sustainable and are underpinned by financial controls that reduce the risk of misusing public money. Budget holders take part in the development of budgets before their presentation to the corporate management board.

The Kent and Medway Fire and Rescue Authority, which has a separate audit and governance committee for more detailed focus, scrutinises the service's budget and performance to make sure it uses public money appropriately. And the service's medium-term financial plan aligns to strategic plans and is well planned and managed, and transparent.

The service manages staff productivity well

We were pleased to see that the service's arrangements for managing performance clearly link resource use to its CRMP and its seven strategic priorities. For example, the service experiences seasonal demands, so it increases available resources during this period.

The service makes the most of its wholetime firefighter resource. For example, the service use dashboards to monitor activity and performance for each station. These provide a clear, easy-to-understand summary of activities.

Each station has annual targets, depending on the number of fire engines at the station. Each crew has to complete 385 home fire safety visits, 54 RAV-Int visits and 36 EDI activities per year. Station leaders manage how their teams achieve these targets.

The service is taking steps to make sure the workforce is as productive as possible. This includes putting in place new ways of working. For example, the service has introduced a home fire safety visit task force team to carry out prevention activities in rural and harder-to-reach areas.

The service works well with other fire and rescue services and partner agencies

We were pleased to see the service meets its statutory duty to work with other organisations. It routinely considers opportunities to work with other emergency responders. For example, the service's fire control is located within Kent Police's Coldharbour site. They share space with ambulance and HM Coastguard colleagues. The service actively supports South East Coast Ambulance Service by co-responding in several on-call station areas.

This work with other responders is aligned to the service's CRMP priorities. For example, a key CRMP priority for the service is to improve its capacity and capability to help with medical emergencies. Providing a more timely, effective response will improve the service to the public.

The service also has a joint fire control partnership with Hampshire and Isle of Wight, Dorset and Wiltshire, and Devon and Somerset fire and rescue services. They are procuring a new control mobilising system, which will improve how they work together.

The service clearly explains all partnerships and collaborations on a benefits register. It states why it is collaborating and the benefits to the fire and rescue service. It comprehensively monitors, reviews and evaluates the results and efficiencies achieved.

For example, the service has worked with HM Coastguard, RNLI and ferry operators to fulfil its statutory duty to respond to incidents involving sea vessels.

This includes:

- joint training on electric vehicles on roll-on, roll-off ferries;
- joint training on ship firefighting simulators;
- joint training and exercises with ferry operators;
- reviews of maritime personal protective equipment; and
- an at-sea assessment team that works with maritime colleagues.

The service has effective business continuity arrangements but should strengthen its plans for industrial action

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

The service has business continuity plans in case of industrial action. It will aim to provide up to 19 fire engines and a height vehicle at strategic locations across the county. The service has identified the number of staff and specialists it needs, but there is no guarantee that the service will be able to fill these positions.

Without knowing who might work during industrial action, it is difficult for the service

to plan for these events, make sure staff with specialist skills are available and identify any gaps early.

The service demonstrates sound financial management

The service carries out regular reviews of all its expenditure, including its non-pay costs. And this scrutiny makes sure the service gets value for money.

The service is taking steps to make sure it achieves efficiency gains through sound financial management and best working practices. It is doing this in important areas such as estates, fleet and procurement. It told us that between 2022 and 2025, it had made £1.03 million in efficiency savings.

For example, the service recognised that the contract it had had to provide first line fire cover for Eurotunnel since the Channel Tunnel opened in 1994 was costing money year on year. Conditions for staff were also deteriorating.

Following consultation with Eurotunnel, the service ended the contract. It has worked with staff and deployed them in other areas of the service. The service will still provide second line fire cover to assist its Eurotunnel counterparts.

The service has made savings and efficiencies that haven't affected its operational performance and the service it gives the public. For example, in 2024, the service saved £216,000 by changing its boat/water provisions. It reduced its specialist hose layer vehicles from two to one, saving £260,000.

It also purchased fire engines for driver training that don't have pumps but are weighted the same. The service told us this had saved it £100,000. At the time of our inspection, it also told us that it had recently brought all cleaning services in-house, which had produced savings and improvement to performance. And it is using a national procurement framework to invest in tracking technology to use vehicles more efficiently.

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

Outstanding

Kent Fire and Rescue Service is outstanding 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.

Promising practice

The service robustly reviews projects to make sure they achieve their goals

Since 2021, the service has used a benefit mapping process for all its projects to make sure they achieve their intended outcomes.

The service maps the benefits before the project starts, reviews progress at midpoint and at the end. This robust process has identified projects failing to provide expected benefits at key milestones, so the service stopped the projects.

This level of scrutiny makes sure the service achieves value for money in all the projects it initiates.

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 makes good use of public money and is planning ahead for future financial challenges

The service has used a wide range of information to develop a sound understanding of future financial challenges. It has set a balanced revenue budget for 2025/26. In its latest medium-term financial plan, it expects a revenue budget deficit of £1.7 million in 2026/27.

It has plans to mitigate its main financial risks. In its February 2025 financial update report to the [fire and rescue authority](#), the service forecast a revenue budget underspend of £1.8 million in 2024/25. The service has already transferred £1.3 million of this total to an insurance and resource reserve to manage future short-term pressures on the revenue budget from the end of the Eurotunnel contract. And the service will transfer any remaining underspend to earmarked reserves at the year end.

The plan is based on assumptions that are robust and realistic. They take account of the wider external environment and some scenario planning for future spending reductions. The service works with professional advisers to model and estimate the potential financial impact of the local government finance settlement. And its sensitivity analysis has helped it to consider the implications of different levels of funding and spending pressures, such as pay awards, on its financial forecast. The service also [benchmarks](#) its assumptions against other fire and rescue services.

The service has robust project management arrangements in place. Before starting a new project, the service requires a clear business case that sets out the financial implications, risks, benefits, savings and value for money improvements. This approach helps the service make informed choices, review how projects perform, and apply lessons learned to future decisions. The service logs all benefits in its benefits register.

The service includes a funding contingency of between 5 percent and 10 percent for each capital investment project. This helps the service manage any delays or unforeseen cost increases.

The service has clear and transparent plans to use reserves sustainably

The service has a sensible and sustainable plan for using its reserves. It carries out an annual risk assessment to determine the level of general reserves it needs to meet assessed financial risks. It aims to keep the general reserve at approximately 5 percent of the base revenue budget.

As at 31 March 2024, the service had £31.8 million in earmarked reserves. It has a clear plan to use them, which is aligned to the medium-term financial plan. The service will use most of the reserves for infrastructure, insurance and resources, and service transformation, as well as rolling budgets.

The service fleet and estates strategies meet future needs and support long-term sustainability

The service's estate and fleet strategies have clear links to its CRMP. The service's 10-year capital investment plan of £69.4 million for 2025/26 to 2034/35 sets out key areas for investment. This includes £37.7 million for vehicles and fire engines, and £1.9 million for IT systems. In total, the service is investing £29.8 million in premises and new buildings. This includes £16 million on the live fire training venue in Ashford, and £10 million on its new workshops and distribution centre.

Both strategies exploit opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness. For example, the service has a climate action plan that includes a fleet zero-emissions target of 2030. Its fleet of carbon neutral vehicles will include 67 electric cars and 47 electric vans. As part of the energy efficiency project, the service is expanding its use of solar panels and intelligent building management systems. It is also exploring heat pumps and community charging points for electric vehicles at fire stations.

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

The service is investing in technology and transformation programmes to improve effectiveness and efficiency

The service actively considers how changes in technology and future innovation may affect risk. The service has a business change, information and technology strategy. The corporate management board updates and oversee this live document. This makes sure that senior leaders are aware of technological risks that could affect the service and measures to mitigate them. The service also works to exploit opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness presented by changes in technology.

The service is actively reviewing how it can use artificial intelligence to improve efficiency and performance. The introduction of 3D cameras will improve efficiency as crews will no longer need to visit a high-risk premises to familiarise themselves with its layout. It can now be done virtually as a group on station.

The service has introduced firefighting robots and drones to use inside buildings. This will improve firefighter safety at incidents that may present structural hazards, such as in derelict buildings.

The service has put in place the capacity and capability it needs to achieve sustainable transformation. It routinely looks for opportunities to work with others to improve efficiency and provide better services in the future.

It manages and resources transformation projects well. An example of this is the service's purchase of a new mobilising system with three other fire and rescue services mentioned in the [Responding to fires and other emergencies section](#).

The service exploits opportunities to produce additional income

The service has moved its treasury management function in-house and built up staff skills in this area, supported by professional advisers. Combined with higher interest rates, this has seen investment income increase. In its February 2025 financial update report to the fire and rescue authority, the service forecast investment income of £2.9 million in the year ending 31 March 2025.

The service also receives additional income from masts, solar panel electricity rebates and a contract with Southern Gas Networks for supplying and responding to carbon monoxide alarms.

Promoting the right values and culture

Good

Kent Fire and Rescue Service is good at promoting the right values and culture.

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

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

Main findings

Most staff demonstrate the service's values

The service continues to have well-defined values, which staff understand. We found staff at all levels of the service showing behaviours that reflect service values.

In our staff survey, 95 percent of respondents (695 out of 729) agreed that their colleagues consistently modelled and maintained service values. And 93 percent of respondents (676 out of 729) agreed with this statement in relation to their manager. In total, 87 percent of respondents (635 out of 756) agreed with this statement in relation to senior leaders.

Historically, there have been some issues between wholetime and on-call operational staff. However, working relationships have improved somewhat. This has been helped by station leaders overseeing both duty systems where stations have them. This is a positive demonstration of the service's 'one team' approach. Staff feel that senior leaders are visible and accessible.

There is a positive working culture throughout the service. In our staff survey, 74 percent of respondents (560 out of 756) agreed that it was safe to challenge the way things were done in the service. This is an increase from our previous inspection, when 67 percent (373 out of 560) agreed.

The service is encouraging psychological safety in the organisation

At the time of our inspection, the service had recently introduced its 'black box thinking' initiative. It uses it to encourage a psychologically safe place for staff to take responsibility for errors without the fear of blame. Staff told us that this had had a positive impact on debriefing and performance reviews. We are looking forward to seeing how this develops across the service.

The service looks after the well-being of its staff

The service continues to have 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. This includes:

- counselling support;
- mental health first aiders;
- an employee assistance programme;
- a 'defusing and demobilising' process to support staff after traumatic incidents; and
- Fire Fighters Charity referrals.

In our staff survey, 96 percent of respondents (726 out of 756) agreed they were confident the service would offer well-being services after a workplace incident. And 96 percent of respondents (727 out of 756) agreed that they felt able to access services to support their mental well-being.

After a traumatic incident, the service has trained 'defusing and demobilising' staff to support those involved. But we heard that some staff co-responding with ambulance crews would welcome improved monitoring of their mental well-being as they were repeatedly exposed to difficult situations.

The service has a robust health and safety culture

The service continues to have effective and well-understood health and safety policies and procedures in place. These policies and procedures are readily available, and the service promotes them effectively to all staff.

The staff survey results showed that 99 percent of respondents (746 out of 756) understood the policies and procedures the service had in place for health and safety. Similarly, 99 percent of respondents (746 out of 756) agreed that the service had clear policies and procedures for reporting all accidents, [near misses](#) and dangerous occurrences. And 99 percent of respondents (745 out of 756) agreed that the service encouraged staff to report them.

During our inspection, we saw that staff reported near misses and the service investigated them. The service offers 24-hour support for health and safety incident events. This further supports staff confidence in the processes.

The service is managing contaminants as best it can with its facilities. However, staff feel that the service could do more to decontaminate personal protective equipment such as helmets and breathing apparatus sets. Its processes at the time of our inspection were mainly for decontaminating fire kit.

The service effectively monitors staff who have second jobs or dual contracts to make sure they don't work excessive hours. Both staff and managers are confident in the procedures.

The service manages staff absence well

We found there are clear processes in place to manage absences for all staff. There is clear guidance for managers, who are confident in using the process. The service manages absences well and in accordance with policy. At the time of our inspection, the service told us that it was implementing an effective attendance management process that operates on a four-week rolling staffing period, which allows for greater flexibility and better absence management than the previous six-week cycle.

The service offers 12 months' maternity leave and surrogacy leave with additional support for expectant and new mothers. It also offers enhanced paternity leave and 'time to heal' if necessary following miscarriage or failed adoption.

Getting the right people with the right skills

Good

Kent 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.

Promising practice

Service-wide training scenarios improve learning and development while promoting inclusivity

The service organises monthly command exercises using scenarios from simulation packages Effective Command and XVR. Everyone on duty, including senior officers, takes part at the same time via a Microsoft Teams video call.

Staff access training opportunities and take part in a developing scenario at the appropriate level for their role. Participants gain a greater understanding of how colleagues at all levels work to resolve a rapidly escalating incident. They learn from their peers' experiences in an open, engaging format.

Staff told us the sessions were informative and immersive.

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 processes in place to manage future workforce needs

The service has good workforce planning in place. This makes sure skills and capabilities align with what it needs to effectively carry out its CRMP. An establishment board reviews staffing levels every six weeks. It reviews current team capabilities and future workforce and competency needs. It reviews the vacancies forecast for 6 and 12 months. The corporate management board oversees this process.

The service responds to staff feedback on workforce needs. For example, the service reviewed its new recruit pathway after feedback that it didn't develop staff consistently. This will make sure trainee firefighters, wholetime and on-call, experience a comprehensive initial training course.

The service expects a 2-year pause in recruitment because it has redeployed 38 dedicated Eurotunnel staff across the service.

Staff effectively maintain their skills and capabilities

Most staff told us that they could access the training they need to be effective in their role. In our staff survey, 86 percent of respondents (646 out of 756) agreed that they received sufficient training to effectively do their job. This wasn't just focused on operational skills. It included leadership, health and safety and safeguarding.

The service's training plans make sure staff maintain competence and capability. For example, twice a year there are training days dedicated to [fire survival guidance](#) for fire control staff. We saw regular CPD for staff in prevention, protection, the risk information team and the safe and well team, as well as for incident commanders at all levels.

All incident commanders are accredited through Skills for Justice and complete appropriately frequent revalidation assessments.

The service monitors staff competence using an electronic monitoring platform. This monitors risk-critical competencies and allows incident commanders to log command hours.

The service keeps its knowledge of staff skills and risk-critical safety capabilities up to date. It reports figures to the learning and competence board on a bimonthly basis. It also reviews e-learning progress every six months. This approach means it can identify gaps in workforce capabilities and resilience. It also means the service can make sound, financially sustainable decisions about current and future needs.

We didn't see any evidence the service provided EDI training to new joiners. But we found the service included EDI in all training content. For example, the service includes non-English speakers in training scenarios to make sure crews consider how they might need to adjust their response. They also use training scenarios involving people with learning disabilities or neurodivergent conditions, to prepare crews for situations they may face. The service should make sure it continues to prioritise EDI.

The service has carried out a skills review across all its departments and, as a result, restructured the HR department just before our inspection. This process has proved to be disruptive and there have been delays in filling key roles.

The service has a positive development culture but could improve how it tracks learning

The service promotes a culture of continuous improvements throughout the organisation, and it encourages staff to learn and develop. For example, the service has processes to share learning from incidents. This is often in the form of a structured debrief. The service shares the learning through the operational learning tracker, which is accessible to all staff.

We were pleased to see that the service has a range of resources to promote learning and development. These include affiliation with the Institution of Fire Engineers, NFCC competency and leadership frameworks, and its ILAM.

Most staff told us they can access a range of learning and development resources. These include monthly incident command scenario training events and courses appropriate for their role or the next role up if they are considering promotion. This supports staff to do their job effectively.

The service has also committed to making sure all firefighters achieve Institution of Fire Engineers 'professional' accreditation two years after their membership exams. The service records CPD to make sure firefighters maintain their competence.

Some staff felt their development was held back by the lack of station facilities for practical training and that the service relied heavily on e-learning. Some rural stations have no hydrant or drill tower and only have access to one scrap car per year for road traffic collision training. To address this, the service has grouped stations into clusters so that each has access, through neighbouring stations, to all the training facilities required to maintain competence without travelling to a central location.

The service would benefit from a process for tracking who has accessed operational learning. At the time of our inspection, there was no way of knowing who had read and learned from what the service had shared.

Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity

Adequate

Kent 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.

Areas for improvement

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

The service should make sure staff are confident using feedback processes to make sure issues are identified and managed appropriately.

Promising practice

A service-wide focus on prevention and community safety initiatives promotes staff inclusion

Twice a year, the service holds 'together days' for all operational and non-operational staff to take part in community safety activities. The service allocates a non-operational member of staff to a station to join the on-duty crew in prevention activities. This is supported by the staff networks.

It improves relationships between operational and non-operational staff and promotes an inclusive workforce. Staff told us the initiative built connections and understanding of each other's 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 gathers and acts on feedback and encourages challenge from staff and representative bodies

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.

Staff told us they had been able to make senior leaders aware of local risks to feed into the CRMP during station visits. The service carries out surveys to measure staff opinions on particular issues. Relevant stakeholders are represented on project working groups.

The service has addressed issues staff have raised, such as the structure of the pathway for new recruits. It reviewed and changed the pathway in response to feedback. Staff believe these actions will have a positive impact.

Representative bodies and staff associations also reported that the service worked well with them. The service meets them weekly and consults them on all projects.

The service acts on inappropriate behaviours but must do more to increase confidence in reporting processes

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

We saw evidence that the service was acting on inappropriate behaviour. There has been an increase in discipline cases. In the year ending 31 March 2024, the service recorded 36 cases compared with 18 the previous year. Of the 36 cases, 6 led to dismissals, and 6 staff resigned prior to conclusion.

But we found evidence of inappropriate behaviours. In our staff survey, 7 percent of respondents (56 out of 756) told us they had felt bullied or harassed at work in the last 12 months. And 7 percent of respondents (51 out of 756) had felt discriminated against at work in the last 12 months.

At the time of our inspection, the service was undergoing significant change. We recognise that this can be challenging for the affected workforce.

The service has clear policies and procedures, but some staff told us they had limited confidence in how well it could deal with cases of bullying, harassment and discrimination, as well as grievances and discipline.

The service has improved the diversity of its workforce

The service has made some improvements to increasing staff diversity at all levels of the organisation. The proportion of firefighters that identified as being from an ethnic minority background has remained at 5.4 percent. However, as at 31 March 2024, the number of firefighters that identified as being from an ethnic minority background had increased on the previous year from 50 to 57.

The proportion of firefighters who identified as a woman has increased from 6.9 percent (82) to 7.4 percent (85) over the same period.

For the whole workforce, as at 31 March 2024, 6.2 percent identified as being from an ethnic minority background compared to 5.8 percent the previous year. This compares to 16.8 percent of the local population and 8.6 percent throughout all fire and rescue services.

As at 31 March 2024, 19.7 percent of the workforce identified as a woman. This is a 1 percent increase on the previous year. The average throughout all fire and rescue services is 20.2 percent.

The service has set a target to increase the proportion of its staff who identify as a woman to 25 percent. To support this, it has a [positive action](#) programme to support people who identify as a woman and other under-represented groups to apply for jobs. The workforce supports this. The service should make sure it consistently opens vacancies to internal and external applicants to make its workforce more diverse.

Recruitment processes could be more transparent and consistent

At the time of inspection, the service didn't blind sift applications or consider the diversity of interview panels. This may lead to [unconscious bias](#) in the process.

We were told that the service was developing its recruitment processes. It requires recruitment panels to comprise staff who have completed the service's 'licence to recruit' training course. This will help provide a more consistent process, but the service should do more to make sure recruitment processes are fully accessible to all.

Some staff feel that the geographical approach to on-call recruitment hasn't had the expected positive impact. This process recruits for groups of stations at a time. But it creates a gap between recruitment campaigns and can leave stations unsure of when they may have new staff.

Many on-call stations remain below their ideal staffing level and could be so for an extended period of time. The service has a major ongoing project to identify barriers to on-call recruitment and produce new ideas to improve the process. But this has been inconsistent. Some staff told us that some stations hadn't been included in the project consultation process.

The service needs to prioritise people impact assessments

Although the service has a process in place to assess equality impact, it doesn't properly assess or act on the impact on each [protected characteristic](#).

We reviewed a sample of people impact assessments, the service's [equality impact assessments](#). We found that the service hadn't recorded its consideration of some characteristics, yet an approver had signed the assessment off. Some records lacked key signatories to confirm approval. And some had allocated actions but didn't have a clear tracking and sign-off process.

The service couldn't provide evidence that it had consulted staff network groups when reviewing people impact assessments. The service told us the document wording implied it had communicated with stakeholders but didn't state who they were.

EDI is linked to all activities, and the service works with its communities to improve inclusivity

The service has an 'everyone together' steering group, which reports on EDI to the corporate management board. It has active staff networks. A cultural difference forum is opening up opportunities to work with seldom-heard groups.

The service makes sure it can offer the right services to its communities and can support staff with protected characteristics. For example, in our staff survey, 86 percent of respondents (50 out of 58) agreed they were satisfied with reasonable adjustments offered by the service.

Staff feel that EDI is linked to all they do. The service requires stations to carry out three EDI activities per month within their communities. Customer engagement leads support the activities.

However, the service has recently lost its head of inclusion. Some staff saw the person as a leader in raising awareness across the organisation. They now have to find their own EDI activities. The service has told us it is recruiting a new lead for inclusion projects.

Managing performance and developing leaders

Adequate

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

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

Area for improvement

The service should make sure it is transparent and fair when appointing and promoting staff.

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 performance and development well

There is a performance management system in place, which allows the service to effectively develop and assess the individual performance of most staff. In Kent Fire and Rescue Service, this is known as the talent benchmark review (TBR).

Most staff reported that they have regular discussions with their manager and that these are meaningful. In our staff survey, 81 percent of respondents (616 out of 756) reported they had had a TBR in the last 12 months. And 86 percent of respondents (528 of 616) felt that their TBR was useful.

Further to this, 71 percent of respondents (534 of 756) discussed their development needs and career goals more frequently than at their TBR. Staff feel confident in the service's performance and development arrangements.

We were told of an example of reasonable adjustments being implemented for a member of staff with a neurodivergent condition.

Promotion processes lack consistency, fairness and transparency

The service needs to do more to make sure its promotion and progression processes are fair. In our staff survey, 67 percent of respondents (504 out of 756) felt that the service's promotion processes were fair.

Some staff reported the processes were inconsistent. We saw evidence of poor retention of paperwork. The service doesn't have a consistent scoring process and nor does it provide a clear rationale to support appointing one candidate over the others. The service should do more to promote fairness and transparency.

Staff told us an HR department restructuring process had left key roles vacant and specialist skills in this area limited.

We recognise that the service is addressing this. It now requires staff who sit on interview panels to have completed its recruitment training. This will improve fairness and consistency.

The service has a diverse leadership team, but its selection process is inconsistent

The service has a diverse leadership team. But we found records of selection processes were poor and identified inconsistencies. In some cases, it wasn't clear how many applicants had applied, been shortlisted or invited for interview.

Where the service had recorded decisions, it sometimes didn't provide a detailed rationale for the appointment.

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

The service has talent management schemes to develop specific staff. These four development pathways prepare staff for promotion.

The service's own academic research has identified 50 high-performing firefighters and crew managers to help it better understand barriers, development needs and potential improvements to processes.

The service uses the TBR process to identify high-potential staff and help staff to explore the opportunities available to them. Most staff are positive about this process. We were told that some staff were deployed in specialist roles on a part-time basis to experience different positions in 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.

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