



Proposed fire and rescue services inspection programme and framework 2023/24

For consultation

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Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) independently assesses and reports on the effectiveness and efficiency of police forces and fire and rescue services (FRSs) in the public interest. We ask the questions that we believe the public requires to have answered, and publish our findings, conclusions and recommendations in an accessible form, using our expertise to interpret the evidence. We provide authoritative information to allow the public to compare the performance of their police force or FRS against others, and to determine whether performance has improved or deteriorated over time. Our recommendations are designed to bring about improvements in the service provided to the public.

Foreword

All safety-critical, essential public services benefit from the scrutiny of inspection and reporting. Our inspections are valuable for both the public and the fire and rescue sector. Since our first round of inspections in 2018, we have seen evidence of how, in many respects, services have improved. Staff have also told us that they have seen worthwhile changes for the better.

In February 2021, we resumed our second full cycle of all FRS inspections in England, known as our 'Round 2' inspections. These inspections had been postponed in 2020 as a result of the pandemic. We have divided all 44 inspections into three phases of inspection, known as 'tranches'.

We found that, while many services that had received causes of concern had taken meaningful steps to improve and act on our recommendations, some services had failed to act sufficiently on the areas for improvement we issued in Round 1. In short, change is urgently needed.

In order to maintain the focus of the sector on the areas we have identified for improvement, we will continue to inspect the effectiveness and efficiency of FRSs and how well they look after their people. However, to state more precisely where we consider improvement is needed, and how FRSs should achieve it, we will move to a common grading approach across FRS and police inspections. We will expand our four-tier grading to five and introduce a new judgment of 'adequate'.

While our inspection questions will be unchanged, this doesn't mean our inspection methodology should stay the same. In order to give a more detailed view of services, we made changes to Round 2 on the basis of feedback from services and the public. These changes included:

- a greater focus on diversity, and in particular race and how services are trying to overcome inequalities;
- considering the productivity of services;
- assessing how services are identifying and planning against known risks to their communities; and
- more case file reviews, particularly in relation to protection and the role carried out by services in fire safety regulations.

We have reflected on how we operated during the pandemic and what improvements we can make to future inspections. We have adopted a hybrid approach to our inspections. This means work is carried out virtually where possible, but we consider it important to continue to visit services in person to make our inspections most effective.

Your response to this consultation will help make sure that we continue to focus our inspection work on what matters most to the public. Thank you for your interest in our proposed inspection plans for 2023/24.

Consultation questions

This document provides details of HMICFRS's proposed fire and rescue services inspection programme and framework for 2023/24, and asks for your views on whether the right areas of FRSs' activities are covered.

In particular, we wish to receive your responses to the following questions:

1. Is focusing on service improvement the most important area for our third round of inspections?
2. Are there any other aspects of effectiveness that we should focus on?
3. Are there any other aspects of efficiency or productivity that we should focus on?
4. Should we inspect the steps FRSs are taking to address climate change? This would mean spending less time on other questions.
5. If so, what should we spend less time on?
6. Is there anything we can do to improve how we inspect equality, diversity and inclusion?
7. Is there anything we can do to improve the way in which we report our findings?
8. Is there anything else we should do to make our FRS assessments as fair as they can be?
9. If we remove our pillar judgments, would it be easier to understand the areas in which FRSs need to improve?

These questions are repeated in the body of this document. At the end of the document, we explain how you can let us have your views.

Introduction

This document provides details of our proposed inspection programme and framework for all 44 FRSs in England for 2023/24.

In our inspections, we focus on the operational service the FRS provides to the public. We carry out a rounded assessment of every FRS and cover its effectiveness and efficiency, and how it looks after its people. We also assess:

- the operational service provided to the public (including prevention, protection, and response);
- the efficiency of the service (how well it provides value for money, allocates resources to match risk, and collaborates with other emergency services); and
- how well the service looks after its people (how well it promotes its values and culture, trains its staff and ensures they have the necessary skills, ensures fairness and diversity for the workforce, and develops leadership and service capability).

Our assessments are designed to allow the public to see how each FRS is performing, including changes over time and in relation to the performance of other services. The resulting assessments include graded judgments of performance.

Our inspection programme and framework first needs to be approved by the Home Secretary before our inspectors act in accordance with it.¹

State of Fire and Rescue

HM Chief Inspector of Fire and Rescue Services for England is required to report each year on the carrying out of inspections, including an assessment of the efficiency and effectiveness of the fire and rescue authorities in England.² The third assessment, [State of Fire 2021](#), was published in December 2021. We may also report on particular themes (through spotlight reports) emerging from our inspections if we consider it appropriate.

¹ Section 28A(2), Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004.

² Section 28B, Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004.

An overview of HMICFRS's proposed inspection programme for fire and rescue services 2023/24

In our next round of inspections (Round 3), we will continue to inspect how effective and efficient FRSs are at carrying out their principal functions of:

- fire safety;
- firefighting; and
- responding to road traffic collisions and other emergencies.³

Since 2018, every service has been inspected at least twice. There is now a benchmark against which we can monitor progress.

We would like to see more progress from FRSs on the areas we have identified for improvement. In Round 3, we will therefore be assessing the progress made by FRSs since our last round of inspections and we will comment on their progress in our reports.

Consultation questions

Question 1: Is focusing on service improvement the most important area for our third round of inspections?

Round 3 will start in early 2023; we will inspect all 44 FRSs in England over a two-year period. We will use a similar methodology to our Round 2 inspection.

The principal questions that the FRSs inspection programme is designed to answer are set out below, along with the corresponding inspection focus.

³ Sections 6-9, Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004.

Principal question	Inspection focus
How effective is the FRS at keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks?	How well the FRS understands its current and future risks, works to prevent fires and other risks, protects the public through the regulation of fire safety, and responds to fires and other emergencies, including major and multi-agency incidents.
How efficient is the FRS at keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks?	How well the FRS secures an affordable way of providing its service, now and in the future.
How well does the FRS look after its people?	How well the FRS service promotes its values and culture, trains its staff and ensures that they have the necessary skills, ensures fairness and diversity for its workforce, and develops leaders.

Our assessment of **effectiveness** will continue to consider how well each FRS is performing its principal functions of preventing fires happening, making sure the public is kept safe through the regulation of fire safety, and responding to emergency incidents. We will continue to provide the public with clarity on how well FRSs are prepared to respond to major incidents with other fire services and agencies.

The [Fire Standards Board](#) has been set up to oversee the identification, organisation, development and maintenance of professional standards for FRSs in England. All fire and rescue authorities must implement approved standards and we will have regard to these standards as part of our inspection.⁴

Question 2: Are there any other aspects of effectiveness that we should focus on?

Our assessment of efficiency makes a clearer distinction between the way each FRS uses its resources to manage its current risks, and how well it is securing an affordable way of managing its risks in the future. We assess whether a service can demonstrate what savings it has made, the effect of these on its operational performance, wider value for money and whether its use of reserves is sustainable.

Question 3: Are there any other aspects of efficiency or productivity that we should focus on?

In our 2021 public perception survey, 84 percent of respondents said FRSs should take action to protect the environment. We have been asked to consider broadening our assessment of sustainability to include what action FRSs are taking to address climate change and reduce their greenhouse gas emissions in accordance with net zero carbon targets.

⁴ [Fire and rescue national framework for England](#), Home Office, 8 May 2018, paragraph 6.4.

In order to inspect this area, we would need to reduce the time we spend on other areas, such as questions on effectiveness and people.

Question 4: Should we inspect the steps FRSs are taking to address climate change? This would mean spending less time on other questions.

Question 5: If so, what should we spend less time on?

Our assessment of how each FRS looks after its people will remain focused on the leadership at all levels in the organisation, including training, diversity, values and culture.

A quarter of the time we have available for inspection in every FRS is spent on inspecting the 'people' questions. We have been asked to increase the scrutiny we give to equality, diversity and inclusion because the steps FRSs have taken haven't always resulted in improvements.

Question 6: Is there anything we can do differently to improve how we inspect equality, diversity and inclusion?

Service reports are normally published between approximately five and ten months after the inspection has been completed. This broad range reflects the fact that services are inspected in batches, with those earlier in a batch having to wait for the services at the end of the batch to complete. At the end of each batch, we assess reports to ensure consistency (our moderation process). Our reports are also professionally edited before they are published.

We are continually seeking ways to reduce the amount of time it takes to publish our reports, without compromising on quality or consistency. We plan to continue our current way of working for Round 3, but are open to suggestions for alternative ways to publish our findings.

Question 7: Is there anything we can do to improve the way in which we report our findings?

Question 8: Is there anything else we should do to make our FRS assessments as fair as they can be?

Other inspections

We carry out thematic inspections, which consist of in-depth assessments of themes or issues. These inspections identify areas of strong and weak practice in FRSs, and may result in recommendations that are relevant to the FRS as a whole.

HMICFRS strategy 2021-2025 sets an intention for the organisation to carry out fewer rounded assessments and more thematic inspections of persistent problems. We have consulted our expert reference group, and the majority said that they felt the sector wasn't ready for a transition to thematic inspection only.

Our second round of fieldwork will be complete by August 2022. We will then take a short pause from our rounded inspections to carry out some follow-up activity on [causes of concern](#).

The Home Secretary can commission thematic inspections on individual matters if needed, outside the approved inspection programme and framework.⁵ In 2020, the Home Secretary commissioned us to review how the London Fire Brigade was progressing with its plan to implement the recommendations from the [Grenfell Tower Inquiry: Phase 1 report](#). We were also commissioned to inspect how each service had responded to the first phase of the pandemic; we published [our findings](#) in January 2021.

We will publish any commissions received from the Home Secretary on our website.

When we identify the need to conduct a thematic inspection, we will consult the Home Secretary in order to alter the approved inspection programme and framework.

Inspecting governance arrangements

The Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, as amended by the Policing and Crime Act 2017, created powers to inspect fire and rescue authorities.⁶ If, during an FRS inspection, we consider that we may need to conduct a corporate governance inspection of a fire authority, we will assess the need to do so against an appropriate set of indicators.

Our first two rounds of inspections of the FRS sector have focused on the service provided to the public, and not on the accountability and scrutiny structures that govern FRSs. We will continue this approach as part of our 2023/24 inspection programme. We intend to develop and consult on proposals for inspecting the governance of the sector. We will do so once we have considered proposals set out in the anticipated Government White Paper on FRS reform.

For 2023/24, HMICFRS inspectors will meet representatives from fire and rescue authorities, police, fire and crime commissioners, locally elected mayors and, in London, the Mayor's Office, but we will not routinely include an assessment of corporate governance as part of the fire and rescue service inspection programme.

The Home Secretary may also, at any time, require us to carry out an inspection of a fire and rescue authority in England, all fire and rescue authorities in England, or all fire and rescue authorities in England of a particular type.⁷

⁵ Section 11, Policing and Crime Act 2017.

⁶ Section 11, Policing and Crime Act 2017.

⁷ Section 28A(3), Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004.

HMICFRS's inspection framework

Inspection framework for FRSs

In our inspections, we gather information to inform our assessments using a range of methods, including:

- analysis of documents and data;
- reviews of operational incidents;
- surveys of the public and of FRSs staff;
- interviews;
- focus groups; and
- observations of fire and rescue practice.

Graded judgments

In our previous rounds of inspection, we assessed and gave graded judgments for the three principal pillars of the inspection methodology (efficiency, effectiveness and people) and for 11 diagnostic questions. We will now assess and give graded judgments only for the diagnostic questions. This better serves the aim of promoting improvements in fire and rescue, and highlighting where an FRS is doing well and where it needs to improve.

Question 9: If we remove our pillar judgments, would it be easier to understand the areas in which FRSs need to improve?

In 2021, we introduced an additional judgment of 'adequate' for our rounded assessments of police forces. In the past, our graded judgements for forces were divided into four categories:

- outstanding;
- good;
- requires improvement; and
- inadequate.

We found that these graded judgments created strong incentives to improve for forces receiving 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement' grades. However, those forces that had received 'good' or 'outstanding' grades were not incentivised in the same way and 'good' covered too broad a range.

In Round 3, both FRS and police inspections will follow the same grading methodologies – meaning that we will expand our four-tier grading to five. This means we can state more precisely where we consider improvement is needed and how to achieve it. The categories of graded judgment will be:

- outstanding;
- good;
- adequate;
- requires improvement; and
- inadequate.

Good is based on policy, practice or performance that meets pre-defined grading criteria that are informed by any relevant national operational guidance or standards. If the policy, practice or performance substantially exceeds what is expected for good, then consideration will be given to a graded judgment of **outstanding**.

If there are appreciable shortcomings in the policy, practice or performance of an FRS, then consideration will be given to a graded judgment of **adequate**.

If we identify a sufficiently substantial number of areas where the FRS needs to make improvements then consideration will be given to a graded judgment of **requires improvement**.

If there are serious, critical or systemic failings of policy, practice or performance of an FRS, then consideration will be given to a graded judgment of **inadequate**.

We will consult further on the more detailed ‘characteristics of good performance’, which replace our existing judgment criteria. Once finalised, they will be provided on our website.

In our reports, we will comment on progress made by the service since its last inspection. But these changes mean it isn’t possible to make direct comparisons between the grades given in our most recent inspection with those in previous FRS inspections.

Priorities for FRS authorities

Fire and rescue authorities must have regard to the [*Fire and rescue national framework for England*](#) in carrying out their functions.⁸

⁸ Section 21(7), Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004.

The *Fire and rescue national framework for England* states that each fire and rescue authority must produce an integrated risk management plan that identifies and assesses all foreseeable fire and rescue related risks that could affect its community.⁹

Our inspectors will consider the content of each fire and rescue authority's integrated risk management plan and how this translates into the operational practice of its fire and rescue service. The plan will be used as a source of information about the assessment of risk and vulnerability in respect of each service, the factors that affect considerations of public safety, and how each FRS will use prevention, protection and response activities to mitigate the risk to communities.

The Fire Standards Board has been established as part of the Home Office's reform programme for FRSs. When designing inspections, we will have regard to all existing and new professional standards for FRSs and take account of national operational guidance.

⁹ The framework is prepared by the Home Secretary. It must set out priorities and objectives for fire and rescue authorities in connection with the discharge of their functions; it may contain guidance to fire and rescue authorities in connection with the discharge of any of their functions; and it may contain any other matter relating to fire and rescue authorities or their functions as the Home Secretary considers appropriate (section 21, Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004).

Methodology, monitoring, assurance and analysis

HMICFRS's monitoring process

HM inspectors of fire and rescue services (HMIs) regularly monitor all services in order to promote improvements. We conduct a number of follow-up activities throughout the year. They include formal revisits and allow us to track the progress made by services against our recommendations. We will continue to report on the progress each service has made since the previous inspection.

We need to monitor some FRSs more regularly, for example where there is an enduring cause of concern or a deterioration in performance. We have developed a policy for a monitoring process for FRSs, which we will publish and implement shortly.

Advisory and reference groups

This inspection programme and framework is being developed with FRSs and authorities. It has been designed to promote improvements across FRSs.

The FRS External Reference Group includes those who have specific skills and experience in the areas that will be inspected, such as representatives from FRSs, the National Fire Chiefs Council, the Home Office, the Local Government Association and police, fire and crime commissioners. We continue to use their knowledge and advice to establish a sound methodology for inspections.

Our Fire Technical Advisory Group considers how to develop appropriate methods of data collection and analysis to support the inspection methodology. The members of the Fire Technical Advisory Group include representatives of the National Fire Chiefs Council co-ordinating committees, the Home Office, representative bodies, FRSs and others.

How to respond to this consultation

Please submit your answers to the consultation questions, together with any other comments, by email to: HMICFRSinspectionsadmin@hmicfrs.gov.uk no later than 1700 on 6 June 2022.

If you prefer, you can post responses to the following address:

Chief Operating Officer
**Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services
(HMICFRS)**
8th Floor
23 Stephenson Street
Birmingham
B2 4BJ

If you have a complaint or comment about HMICFRS's approach to consultation, you can email this to: HMICFRSinspectionsadmin@hmicfrs.gov.uk

How consultation responses will be reviewed

HM Chief Inspector of Fire and Rescue Services will consider respondents' views and, if he determines it appropriate to do so, change the proposed inspection programme and framework before putting it to the Home Secretary for approval.

In accordance with section 28A(2), Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, HM Chief Inspector of Fire and Rescue Services must obtain the approval of the Secretary of State for an inspection programme or inspection framework before the inspectors act in accordance with it.

The final document, which will be appropriately revised to reflect the results of the consultation, will be made available on our website.

You should note that we may publish consultation responses, or summaries of them, except where they have been provided in confidence. Please indicate in your response if you do not wish it to be published.

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