



Safest People, Safest Places

Combined Fire Authority

25 June 2024

HMICFRS State of Fire 2023 Report

Report of the Deputy Chief Fire Officer

Purpose of Report

1. To provide Members with a summary of the key headlines from the His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) State of Fire and Rescue Annual Report 2023.

Background

2. HMICFRS began inspecting Fire and Rescue Services (FRS) in 2018. Every year the Chief Inspector of Fire and Rescue Services prepares a report on the sector, looking back over the inspections it has carried out over a specified time period. The 2023 report was published on 9 May 2024, a copy of which can be found at Appendix A to this report.
3. The report acknowledges the vital role FRS undertake to help keep the public safe, including responding to major events such as flooding and contributing to overseas efforts (Morocco and Ukraine).
4. Also, it acknowledges another challenging year for FRS, with financial pressures, recruitment challenges, preparations for industrial action and impacts on industrial relations, and dealing with the consequences of extreme weather.

Summary of key findings

5. The report draws out a number of themes as can be seen below:

- 5.1 FRS leaders need to do more to improve working cultures.
- 5.2 A lack of diversity and inclusion is affecting public and staff trust.
- 5.3 Staff should be supported, developed and have the skills they need to carry out their jobs effectively.
- 5.4 Managers need to give more consideration to the wellbeing of their staff.
- 5.5 FRS are struggling to maintain an effective on-call duty system.
- 5.6 FRS are making good progress on the Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase 1 recommendations.
- 5.7 Many FRS need to improve how consistently they carry out protection work.
- 5.8 Leaders of FRS should consider using their resources in a more strategic way.

Systematic challenges – progress and areas for improvement

6. The fire and rescue sector has made some good progress at a national level, but the Government must press ahead with reforms.

- 6.1 The work of the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) with the Home Office and Local Government Association (LGA) to ensure that risk is defined and managed in a consistent way is noted as an important step forward for the sector.
- 6.2 NFCC has also been commended for its response to the values and culture in fire and rescue services spotlight report recommendations and on its proactive focus to promote improvements in leadership, behaviour, talent management, safeguarding and continuing professional development.
- 6.3 The on-call duty system poses particular challenges, with FRS experiencing acute difficulties in maintaining on-call availability, the recruitment and retention of on-call firefighters, and the effects of increased training times and the need to maintain competency requirements. Returning the on-call duty system to a sustainable state requires a system-wide and constructive response from all parties involved.
- 6.4 Government's response to the White Paper, Reforming Our Fire and Rescue Service, consultation is welcomed, however, the Government must make reform a priority, noting the consultation response does not include deadlines for implementing the proposals.

6.5 It is recognised that the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) has considerable influence, and it is noted that this influence has sometimes stood in the way of progress and gone against FRS' values.

7. Values, culture and the management of misconduct need to urgently improve.

7.1 The development of the Core Code of Ethics and its adoption by FRS is positive. The introduction of DBS checks for employees with supporting guidance from NFCC, and updates to the Fire Standards are also positive steps.

7.2 Independent culture reviews and the HMICFRS Spotlight on Culture report have identified some serious concerns.

7.3 In the survey HMICFRS conducted with FRS, staff reported bullying, harassment and discrimination in every FRS in England.

7.4 During fieldwork, HMICFRS found examples of racist, homophobic and misogynistic behaviour in a quarter of FRS in England, behaviour which was often excused as 'banter'.

7.5 In most FRS, staff know how to raise concerns if they experience or witness misconduct but, in some FRS, staff have low confidence in reporting.

7.6 Some members of staff said they felt unable to report bad behaviour for fear of reprisals.

7.7 Evidence from a thematic inspection of the handling of misconduct allegations which concluded in January 2024 (final report expected to be published this summer) suggests that unacceptable behaviour remains commonplace, but there are some signs of improvement.

7.8 HMICFRS consider that it is likely that the true number of misconduct cases in FRS is higher than what has been reported.

7.9 HMICFRS has also observed a lack of confidence amongst supervisors and managers to use formal performance management and discipline processes, and references a lack of training as a reason for this.

8. FRS leaders need to take a strategic approach to service improvements.

8.1 Strong and effective senior leadership that focuses on the fundamental aspects of FRS in a strategic and people-centred way is seen as an enabler for improvements.

8.2 However, HMICFRS have observed leaders who are not strategic enough in their approaches – this particularly applied to senior leaders at Assistant Chief Fire Officer (ACFO) level and above.

8.3 Challenges include:

- a) Failing to link the risks outlined in Community Risk Management Plans to how FRS are run, and future planning and improvement work being carried out in isolation, with leaders failing to recognise that FRS operate as a system and that pieces of work are related.
- b) Smaller FRS struggle to improve due to capacity and resources. For example, limited resources to employ the right specialists, such as IT experts, limits capacity to improve.
- c) Leaders not fully understanding the barriers they face to make improvements. For example, culture problems have only been brought to light through inspections, specific incidents and adverse media coverage, with some Chief Fire Officers (CFOs).
- d) CFOs unaware of their prevalence and the scale of these issues within their FRS.

8.4 The Fire Standards Board's new Leading the Service standard and NFCC-run Executive Leadership Programme are seen as enablers to improve leadership.

8.5 HMICFRS notes that there is no agreed compulsory course or development required to become an ACFO or above, and existing courses have not been reviewed to make sure they are fit for purpose. HMICFRS calls for an urgent need for a College of Fire and Rescue to be established so that a mandatory leadership programme can be made available for applicants to ACFO roles or above. An equivalent executive leadership programme is run by the College of Policing.

8.6 Leadership teams also need diversity, and currently leadership within FRS is not diverse enough.

8.7 There is a lack of innovative thinking on how to improve diversity, and more strategic thought needs to be put into attracting candidates from outside the sector.

8.8 HMICFRS supports the idea that a College of Fire and Rescue should be established as part of the College of Policing infrastructure. HMCI Andy Cooke states 'I firmly believe that is the most effective and efficient thing to do'. It should, however, have a separate budget and separate leader.

9. HMICFRS needs additional powers to continue to make communities safer.

- 9.1 HMICFRS are concerned that a few FRS have attempted to influence the outcome of inspections.
- 9.2 HMICFRS has also noted that FRS are not taking enough action in response to previous reports and recommendations.
- 9.3 HMICFRS recommends that:
 - a) Government should make it a legal requirement for FRS to publish a response to HMICFRS inspection reports.
 - b) Fire and rescue authorities (FRAs) should be able to request a commissioned inspection (this power already exists for police and crime commissioners)
 - c) Existing inspection powers should be extended to include a power to enforce recommendations made and a requirement for 'additional bodies,' such as the NFCC, to respond to HMICFRS recommendations. HMICFRS are of the view that widening the requirement beyond FRAs in relation to its recommendations will make sure HMICFRS can bring about system-wide change.

Interim findings from Round 3 inspections

10. In March 2023, HMICFRS started its third full round of inspections of all 44 FRS in England.
11. Inspection reports have been published for 15 out of 44 services.
12. HMICFRS introduced a new 'adequate' grade in-between 'requires improvement' and 'good,' which has been noted as a contributory factor in some grades declining.
13. 6 out of the 15 FRS inspected to date are struggling to make improvements, often because they do not have sufficient capacity and their staff not having the skills they need to manage change throughout the FRS.
14. HMICFRS also found that, for some FRS, problems are compounded by inefficient and ineffective IT systems. These services have failed to address areas for improvement (AFI) previously given to them, and six services have received more AFI this round.

National Recommendations

15. HMICFRS report on the status of each of the previous six national recommendations, of which three are already complete. The three outstanding recommendations are as follows:

15.1 Recommendation 3: In progress

The Home Office, in consultation with the fire and rescue sector, should review and with precision determine the roles of: FRS and those who work in them

Update: By 1 June 2024, HMICFRS expect the Home Office to provide detailed plans as to how it will complete this recommendation. HMICFRS welcome the Home Office's proposals to create legislation to give CFOs operational independence and the review of the pay negotiation processes.

15.2 Recommendation 4: In progress

The Home Office, LGA, NFCC and trade unions should consider whether the current pay negotiation machinery requires fundamental reform. If so, this should include the need for an independent pay review body and the future of the 'Grey Book'.

Update: By 1 August 2024, HMICFRS expect the Home Office to provide an update on the review of the National Joint Council's mechanisms, operations and transparency, and further detailed plans as to how it will complete this recommendation.

15.3 Recommendation 5: In progress

The Home Office should consider the case for legislating to give chief fire officers operational independence. In the meantime, it should issue clear guidance, possibly through an amendment to the Fire and Rescue National Framework for England, on the demarcation between those responsible for governance and operational decision making by the chief fire officer,

Update: By 1 August 2024, HMICFRS expect the Home Office to provide an update on their intentions to legislate.

16. Once relevant updates have been provided by the Home Office, HMICFRS will review any progress made and will consider issuing revised completion dates for recommendations 3, 4 and 5

Next Steps

17. The Service will reflect on the content of the State of Fire and work with the NFCC to implement the recommendations.

Recommendations

18. Members are requested to:
 - a) **note** the contents of the report.