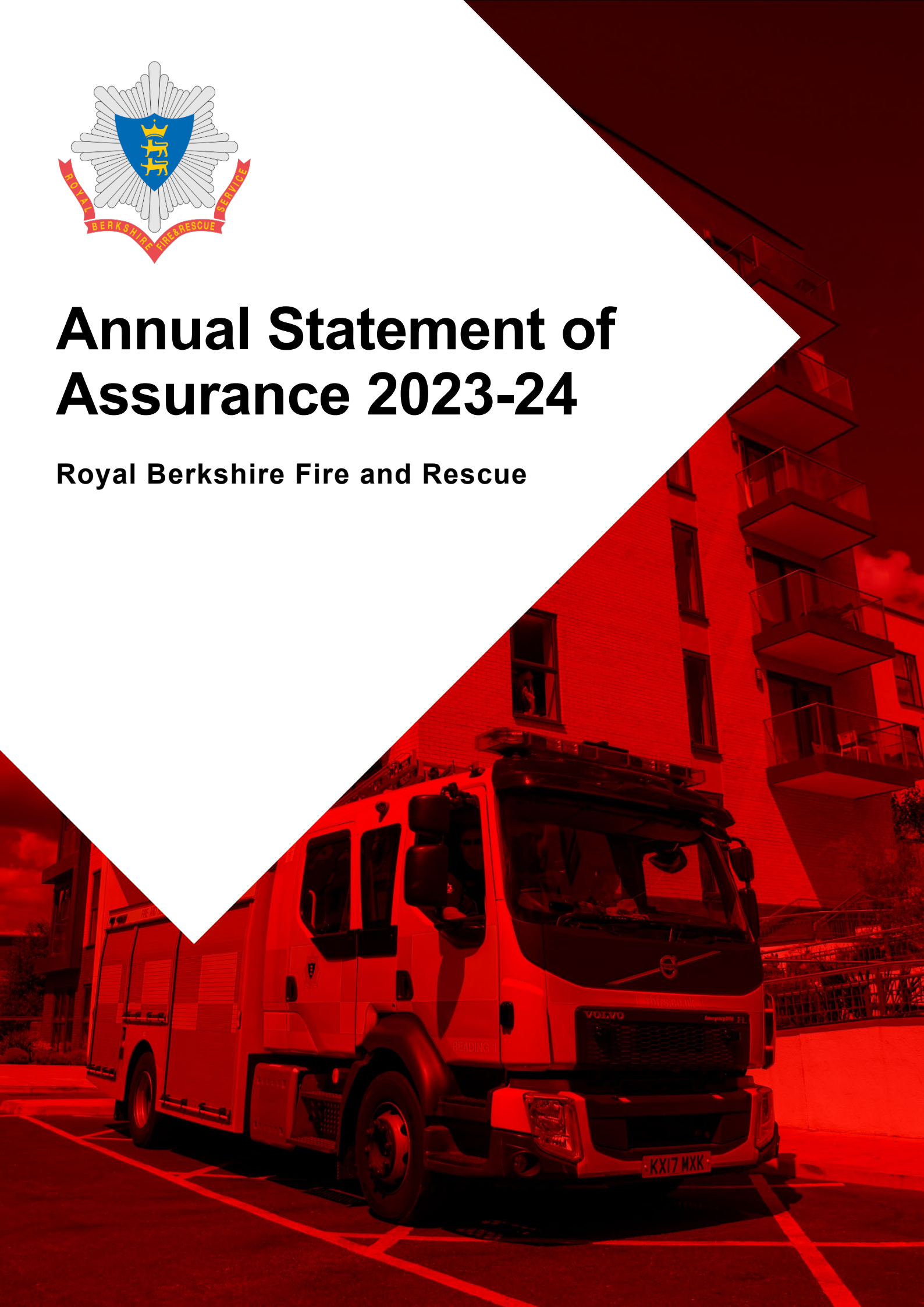




Annual Statement of Assurance 2023-24

Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue





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We will consider the request and get back to you. For more information on accessibility at Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service, please read our [Accessibility Statement](#).



Introduction

We are required by the [Fire and Rescue National Framework for England](#) to provide an Annual Statement of Assurance on financial, governance and operational matters to enable our communities, Government, local authorities and partners to make a valid assessment of our governance arrangements. This Statement of Assurance sets out the governance arrangements the Royal Berkshire Fire Authority (RBFA) had in place for the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024.

We have written this document in accordance with the [guidance](#) published by the Department for Communities and Local Government on Statements of Assurance for fire and rescue authorities in England, which suggests that where relevant information is clear, accessible and user friendly is available within existing documents, extracts or links to these documents may be included within a Statement of Assurance. This Statement includes extracts or links to key documents, or other sources of information, where relevant.

In 2022, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) completed a second inspection of Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS). The report was published in January 2023, and we remained rated as 'good' across the three main inspection pillars of 'effectiveness', 'efficiency', and 'people'. A copy of the inspection report is available on the [HMICFRS website](#). RBFRS continues to deliver its action plan to address the area for improvements identified by HMICFRS during its inspection, which is overseen by Programme Board and the Audit and Governance Committee. RBFRS is due to be inspected by HMICFRS in Q3 2024/25, providing further external assurance with the report expected to be published Q1 2025/26.

The Fire and Rescue Service National Framework

The [Fire and Rescue National Framework for England](#) sets out the Government's priorities and objectives for Fire and Rescue Authorities in England. The National Framework outlines the high-level expectations although it does not require a detailed account of operational matters which are best determined locally.

The key priorities established by the framework are:

- Making appropriate provision for fire prevention and protection activities and response to fire and rescue related incidents.
- Identifying and assessing the full range of foreseeable fire and rescue related risks their areas face.
- Collaborating with emergency services and other local and national partners to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the service they provide.
- Being accountable to communities for the service they provide; and
- Developing and maintaining a workforce that is professional, resilient, skilled, flexible and diverse.



Our legal responsibilities

The following legislation provides the main legal basis and outlines the statutory responsibilities and powers of the Royal Berkshire Fire Authority.

- The Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004
- The Civil Contingencies Act 2004
- Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005
- Policing and Crime Act 2017

In 2018, the Government launched a revised Fire and Rescue National Framework which sets out the Fire Authority's main responsibilities and these are shown below:

Royal Berkshire Fire Authority is required to:

- Contribute to safer communities by developing a Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) to identify, assess and mitigate all foreseeable fire and rescue related risks faced by the communities of Royal Berkshire.
- Work in partnership with the people of Royal Berkshire and a wide range of partners locally and nationally to deliver a capable, resilient service.
- Be accountable to you for our actions and decision making.
- Have scrutiny arrangements in place that reflect the high standard you expect for an important public safety service.
- Provide assurance to you and to Government on financial, governance and operational matters and on national resilience capability.



How we make our judgements

In looking at our obligations, we have made a judgement on each based on the following definitions.

Fully met	The requirements of applicable legislation and guidance are being consistently met.
Substantially met	The requirements of applicable legislation and guidance are mostly being met. Where legislation and guidance are not being met there is minimal risk to the Fire Authority discharging associated duties and powers for the provision of a fire and rescue service.
Partially met	The requirements of applicable legislation and guidelines are being inconsistently applied exposing the Fire Authority to considerable risk in discharging the necessary duties and powers associated with the provision of a fire and rescue service.



Summary Judgements

Financial Matters

It is the view of RBFA that, at the end of the 2023-24 financial year, requirements associated with the appropriate management of financial matters were fully met.

Governance Matters

It is the view of RBFA that, at the end of the 2023-24 financial year, requirements associated with appropriate business practice, high standards of conduct and sound governance were fully met.

Operational Matters

It is the view of RBFA that, at the end of the 2023-24 financial year, requirements associated with operational matters were fully met.

National Framework Requirements

It is the view of RBFA that at the end of the 2023-24 financial year, the requirements associated with the Fire and Rescue National Framework for England have been fully met.



Financial Assurance

It is the view of RBFA that, at the end of the 2023/24 financial year, requirements associated with the appropriate management of financial matters were fully met.

Evidence in support of the judgement

The Fire Authority places significant importance on ensuring that its financial management arrangements are in line with the expectations of a public body.

The Authority has robust budget monitoring processes in place. Budget monitoring is conducted on a monthly basis and reported to Members on a quarterly basis. The outturn position for the year was a surplus of £113,000, a variance of 0.27% against the revenue budget of £41.975 million.

Treasury management outcomes are also reported on a quarterly basis to Members. The Authority complied with all treasury and prudential code limits. It also operated its treasury operations within the parameters of the prudential indicators set by the Authority in its Treasury Strategy.

One piece of evidence in support of the judgement is the annual, independent audit which is undertaken to review the Fire Authority's Statement of Accounts. This summarises the financial position of the Fire Authority at the end of the financial year and its financial performance throughout the year.

Unfortunately, our new external auditor, Grant Thornton, will be unable to offer an opinion on the Accounts for 2023/24. This in no way reflects on the Authority which has complied with all statutory deadlines in terms of producing its financial statements. The reason for the 2023/24 Accounts being disclaimed stems from the previous auditor's inability to provide resource to undertake previous years' audits within the Government's backstop date.

Nevertheless, within the constraints mentioned above, the external auditor has not identified any issues that would affect the revenue outturn position or the usable reserves position, as set out in the 2023/24 Accounts, suggesting that good controls are in place.

The external auditor also has responsibility for assessing the Authority's arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources and whether there are any significant risks or weaknesses. In undertaking this value for money work, the external auditor has concluded that proper arrangements are in place and has not identified any significant risks or weaknesses.

Further assurance of sound financial management is provided by the internal auditor who undertook a tax process audit during 2023/24. From the findings of that audit, there were no actions required from management.

Further information about how the Service implements financial controls can be found in our [Constitution](#). We publish a number of [financial documents](#) on our website.



Governance Assurance

It is the view of RBFA that, at the end of the 2023-24 financial year, requirements associated with appropriate business practice, high standards of conduct and sound governance were fully met.

Evidence in support of the judgement

Our governance arrangements

Royal Berkshire Fire Authority is a combined Fire Authority which means it is made up of 20 elected councillors from the six Unitary Authorities in Berkshire: Bracknell Forest, Slough Borough, Reading Borough, Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, West Berkshire and Wokingham. The Fire Authority is a legal body with statutory duties and responsibilities, including the scrutiny of the Service as a whole. The Fire Authority is responsible for setting the strategic direction, policies and priorities of the Service.

Find out more about the Fire Authority on our [website](#).

Organisational governance

The Fire Authority, as a public body, places significant emphasis on ensuring that effective governance arrangements are in place.

Governance is concerned with how the Fire Authority manages its affairs on a day-to-day basis including business practices, standards of conduct and overall management procedures.

The Fire Authority undertakes an annual assessment of the governance arrangements using the principles of the CIPFA/SOLACE Framework *Delivering Good Governance in Local Government*. Our Annual Governance Statement explains how the Authority has complied with the Framework and meets the requirements of [Regulation 6\(1\) of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015](#), which requires all relevant bodies to prepare an Annual Governance Statement. The [Annual Governance Statement 2023/24](#) confirms assurance related to the governance arrangements.

The Fire Authority is committed to being [fully transparent](#) in accordance with the principles of good governance and legal requirements.

Contracted internal audits

RBFA has contracted out the internal audit to RSM, an external company. In addition to auditing aspects of the Fire Authority required by legislation, the internal auditors are also instructed, as part of the audit plan agreed with the Audit and Governance Committee, to audit various other aspects of the service.

The appointed Internal Auditor (RSM) is required to provide an annual independent and objective opinion to the Authority on risk management, governance and the control environment. The annual



Audit Plan is agreed by the Audit and Governance Committee and in 2023/24 RSM has reported on the following audits:

Audit	Assurance Level
Payroll provider – Dataplan	Substantial assurance
Sickness Absence Management	Reasonable assurance
Firefighter Pension administration (West Yorkshire Pension Fund)	Substantial assurance
Community Risk Management Plan	Reasonable assurance
Risk Management and Governance	Reasonable assurance
IT General Controls	Reasonable assurance
GDPR Governance	Advisory Audit
High Level Tax Process Review	Advisory Audit

Our auditors issued a positive assurance opinion on six audits. Two substantial assurances were received with reasonable assurance given on the Sickness absence management, risk management governance and community risk management plan with medium recommendations issued. These are being addressed. For IT general controls, one high recommendation was issued and a plan has been developed to address this.

An advisory audit was completed for GDPR Governance which highlighted significant issues. A plan is under development.

All audit actions are monitored through the Strategic Performance Board and Audit and Governance Committee.



Operational Assurance

It is the view of RBFA that, at the end of the 2023-24 financial year, requirements associated with operational matters were fully met.

Evidence in support of the judgement

Management of Risk

The Fire Authority has a statutory duty under the Fire and Rescue Service National Framework, to produce a plan to identify and assess all foreseeable fire related risks at a county, regional and national level.

Our [Corporate Plan and CRMP 2023 – 2027](#) outlines our strategic activities for Protection, Prevention and Response. The Plan brings together our three strands of service delivery and sets out our plans to ensure the right resources are in the place, at the right time to respond to emergencies. This plan was developed during 2022/23 and was consulted on before being taken to the Fire Authority in April 2023 for agreement. Delivery against our CRMP is monitored through our Programme Board and Strategic Performance Board.

The public and any other stakeholder must be consulted on the content of the plan and are consulted again if we plan to change the service we currently deliver. The consultation must be undertaken in accordance with the legal principles of consultation and current Government guidance, as well as our own Consultation Principles which have also been subject to public consultation.

Responses received to any consultations are considered by the Fire Authority before any decision is made. Further information on our [consultations](#) is available on our website.

Our CRMP aligns to the requirements of the [Fire and Rescue Service National Framework for England 2018](#) and the [Community Risk Management Planning Fire Standard](#) and which includes the assessment of risk. The Service has a comprehensive evidence base that identifies the risks to the communities of Berkshire. Our CRMP and Evidence base is externally audited.

The processes we have adopted use a combination of risk modelling, historical data and professional judgement to assess impact and consequence with likelihood that an event will occur, ensuring that a thorough analysis has been completed. Our published CRMP evidence base summarises the detailed analysis and evidence used to develop the CRMP and outlines the methods of analysis used to calculate risk and risk location within Berkshire.

Our services to the community

The primary legislation associated with fire and rescue services in England and Wales is the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 which sets out the statutory responsibilities of the Authority for providing an FRS that has the people, equipment and training needed to carry out the following core functions:



- The provision of information, advice and encouragement on the prevention of fires, restricting the spread of fires in buildings and the means of escape from fires. We use our data and information from partner agencies to identify members of the public who are at the greatest risk from fire and we deliver Safe and Well visits to them. Additionally, we work closely with partner agencies to reduce deliberate fires and arson.
- We carry out fire safety, road safety and water safety talks in schools and work with partner agencies to keep our communities safe, as well as continuing our social media campaigns and prevention advice.
- Our fire safety officers undertake inspections of workplaces providing advice and guidance to owners and occupiers to enable them to be compliant with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, ensuring our communities are safe, using enforcement action where necessary.
- A comprehensive Risk Based Inspection Programme (RBIP) exists to support our protection activities. Our RBIP utilises a methodology using societal risk based on occupancy type combined with known risk factors. Consistency of approach is achieved through the use of National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) audit forms.
- We respond to emergencies including fires, road traffic collisions, air and rail crashes, water rescues and flooding, hazardous chemical incidents and many other types of emergencies. Our firefighters regularly train, maintain and test equipment, both within the service and with our partners to ensure they remain ready to respond to emergencies at all times.

We take into account local community and risk information by creating [Hub Safety Plans](#) which feed into our risk management process. We outline our approach, the risks and the associated analysis in our [Corporate Plan and Community Risk Management Plan](#) published on our website.

We work closely with our partners as part of the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum (TVLRF) to help understand local risk and actively provide resource, capacity and capability in support of the work of the Forum. RBFRS is committed to a programme of joint service training with Thames Valley Police, South Central Ambulance Service and the three Thames Valley fire services to deliver JESIP training to enable and fulfil the requirements of the JESIP Doctrine.

Specific Events

RBFA actively monitors how the service is delivered to the community of Berkshire through a variety of systems including:

- Regular performance reports
- Risk based operational debriefs



- Feedback from staff to identify improvements on how the service can be delivered through an operational assurance process
- Attendance at significant emergency incidents by managers to monitor the performance of the firefighters
- All protection and prevention activities are subject to internal quality assurance.

RBFA ensures that all relevant matters arising from the above areas are considered, and where appropriate changes are made to improve the way the community is served throughout Berkshire.

The Strategic Performance Board (SPB) scrutinises performance and reports to the Senior Leadership Team. Members play a key role in scrutinising performance through regular reports and presentations to Audit & Governance Committee and the full Fire Authority. All our [performance reports](#) and performance against targets are published on our website.

The Operational Assurance Framework exists to monitor, report and act on outcomes from active monitoring and incident debriefs and this feeds into both national operational learning and joint organisational learning.

Our [Annual Report](#) provides the details of our achievements, key milestones and performance in line with our purpose and Vision. Our [Annual Plan](#) sets out our Annual Objectives and highlights areas of focus in achieving these Objectives.

Mutual Aid Agreements

RBFRS has mutual aid agreements with each of the neighbouring fire and rescue services whereby:

- In the event of a significant emergency, RBFA can, and have, requested additional resources from neighbouring fire authorities
- Should the address of an emergency be closer to a fire engine from a neighbouring fire authority, a request will be made for that fire engine to attend the incident

Specialist equipment and trained personnel can also be requested from other fire and rescue services to attend significant emergencies in Berkshire. In the event of a national emergency elsewhere in the county, RBFA has specialist resources that can be deployed to assist those in need.

RBFRS hosts two National Resilience assets; the High Volume Pumping unit (HVP) and the Mass Decontamination Unit (MDU) and also provides a Flood Rescue asset as part of the National Coordination and Advisory Framework (NCAF) arrangements.

Health and Safety Assurance

We have an established suite of key health and safety performance indicators that enable us to closely monitor health and safety performance at all levels. The indicators cover areas such as personal injuries and vehicle accidents, near misses, events that are reportable to HSE under the



RIDDOR, fitness testing and sickness. This is monitored quarterly by our Health, Safety and Wellbeing Committee. RIDDOR injury events, sickness and fitness data are also monitored by our Strategic Performance Board.

A comprehensive health and wellbeing provision is in place to support employees throughout their career. During 2023/24 we continued our focus on protecting the health, safety and wellbeing of staff in all roles, ensuring measures were in place to maintain operational resilience and ensure safe working environments. Activity also focussed on identifying reasonable and practical steps the Service and individuals can take to minimise firefighters' exposure to contaminants. Proactive advice and support is provided to take account of the range of challenges being faced by individuals.

Our Operational Assurance Framework illustrates how the learning outcomes from internal and external events identified through accident investigations, debriefs, active monitoring reports and stakeholder engagement are implemented via forums such as the Operational Learning and Assurance Board and Health and Safety and Wellbeing Committee.

Information is shared with staff via Health and Safety bulletins. To provide assurance on the effectiveness of our health and safety management arrangements, we have an established programme of station assurance visits. Internal audits are carried out by our internal auditors and by the Health and Safety Team. In addition, peer audits are carried out by Health and Safety Practitioners from the NFCC South East Region.

Training Assurance

Operational staff in qualification is regularly measured and development and assessment pathways take account of the skills and knowledge required for role. On-call individuals are afforded additional training opportunities alongside their whole-time colleagues. An annual training plan is developed and a suite of core skill courses are available for all staff. Middle and Supervisory managers attend a leadership development programme.

The range of training products to support staff access learning more flexibly continues to broaden. The blend of practical and online facilities provides a more effective and efficient approach to training and assessment and has enabled the Service to disseminate important learning packages to enhance understanding of risks within the community and operational environment.

All internal and external delegates attending our training courses and development days are invited to complete evaluation forms. These are analysed by the Training Manager and used to inform improvements in delivery.

Development and Assessment Pathways (DAPS) have been developed for several of our roles which provide a clear development path to the next level and are actively in use. We are also aligned to professional frameworks such as for the Fire Safety Inspecting Officers.



Duty to Collaborate

The Corporate plan and CRMP 2023-2027 outlines the legislation contained in the Policing and Crime Act 2017, which places a duty on emergency services to collaborate in the interests of efficiency and effectiveness. To support, champion and provide strategic oversight of collaborative activity within the service, RBFA has appointed a Lead Member for Collaboration. This Councillor forms part of Thames Valley Steering Group and is joint lead for Thames Valley Fire Control Service (TVFCS) Joint Committee. The Thames Valley Collaboration Steering Group provides the structure, governance and direction for blue light collaboration. This and our collaboration activities are explained in greater detail in the [Thames Valley five year plan](#). The Thames Valley Collaboration Register is intended to demonstrate the projects being considered and worked on within the Thames Valley Emergency Services Collaboration Programme.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Under the Equality Act 2010, public authorities have a legal obligation to comply with the public sector equality duty (PSED). This is a duty on public authorities to consider how our policies, decisions and activities affect people who are protected under the Equality Act. This incorporates nine protected characteristics age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief, sex and sexual orientation.

We are committed to promoting equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in both the service we deliver to the community and the employment of our staff. EDI is about understanding and respecting differences and ensuring the right people receive the right services. We also understand that a diverse workforce with individuals who can offer different skills, experience and knowledge will benefit us as an organisation and ensure we are able to meet the needs of the diverse community we serve.

In April 2022, following public and internal consultation, the Fire Authority agreed the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Objectives in line with the Public Sector Equality Duty set out in the Equality Act 2010. These are published on our website and [performance](#) against these are monitored by our Strategic Performance Board.

The diversity of our workforce is important and whilst there is a good representation across our protection, prevention and professional support roles, we are working hard to attract a wider pool of applicants into firefighter positions. In 2023/24 we undertook positive action events and continued with the second year of our summer intern programme aimed at 17 and 18 year old residents of Berkshire who are from ethnic groups that are currently under-represented within our Service.

An Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Network assists the Service consider its activities and pulls of diversity of experience and thought regarding areas for attentions and progression. An EDI Steering Group was introduced in 2023/24 to deliver work in support of our EDI objectives and associated plans.



National Framework Assurance

It is the view of Royal Berkshire Fire Authority (RBFA) that, at the end of the 2023/24 financial year, requirements associated with the Fire and Rescue National Framework for England have been fully met.

Evidence in support of the judgement

To provide an assessment of how well RBFA adheres to the National Framework, an internal assessment was undertaken and was subject to an internal moderation exercise to scrutinise the assessments made. We use external evaluations through audits, assessment against professional standards and independent inspections. The outcome was that RBFA fully met the Framework requirements for 2023/24 and actions are in place to monitor for any changes.

This outcome is further supported by the independent inspection by HMICFRS who judged RBFRS as good in our previous inspection across the three main pillars of 'Effectiveness', 'Efficiency' and 'People'.

Our Future Plans

RBFA is determined to continue to provide a safe and efficient service, whilst meeting changing local needs and balancing the budget. Plans put in place over the last few years have provided a good foundation to meet that challenge.

In April 2023, the RBFA reviewed and agreed the outcomes of the public consultation on our Corporate Plan and CRMP 2023-2027, demonstrating how RBFRS will deliver its services to achieve the Fire Authority's six Strategic Commitments. Planned work for this programme of work is detailed in the [Annual Plan 2024/25](#).

Our annual plan is published on our website and includes specific areas of focus for the year ahead in support of our Vision and purpose, and to ensure RBFRS utilises and maximises its available resources to deliver a quality service to the people of Royal Berkshire.

We will continue to review and implement action plans for the HMICFRS thematic inspections. Our [actions](#) in response to the Values and Culture in fire and rescue services report are published on our website. A gap analysis has been completed following the publication of the Standards of Behaviour: The handling of misconduct in fire and rescue services report and a comprehensive action plan is in place.

We will continue to monitor the government's policies on Fire Reform and participate in consultations and engage with ministers to provide an evidence led response which will support the needs of our communities.



We will also continue to review and understand our position against the published Fire Standards.

Following the publication in Q1 2025/26 of our HMICFRS report from the next round of inspections, we will review the areas for improvements and develop the necessary action plans.

How we engage with our communities

You can get involved with the work of the Fire Authority by attending the public meetings that are held regularly by the Authority.

We value the views of our communities to ensure we are providing the service you need. We consult formally on the ways in which we propose to deliver services through the CRMP consultation. We offer our community the opportunity to sign up for updates regarding our consultations which are published on our [Consultation Hub](#). This and more information about our plans and priorities can be found on our website www.rbfrs.co.uk.

Access to information

A range of information about RBFRS is routinely published on our website. For more information on access to data and information, please visit our [website](#).

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