

WMFS
West Midlands
Fire Service

Statement of Assurance

2023/24

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Introduction

Fire and Rescue Authorities must provide annual assurance on financial, governance and operational matters and show how they have had due regard to the expectations set out in their Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP).

The West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority (WMFRA, also titled the Authority) is required to publish an annual Statement of Assurance as part of the Fire and Rescue National Framework for England. The Statement of Assurance for West Midlands Fire Service (WMFS) provides an easy and accessible way for communities, government, local authorities, and partners to assess the Authority's performance and governance arrangements.

National guidance on the content of Statements of Assurance published in May 2013 suggests that where Authorities have already set out relevant information that is clear, accessible and user friendly within existing documents, they may wish to include extracts or links to these documents within their Statement of Assurance. This Statement includes such extracts or links to key documents where relevant. This document sets out the approach taken to ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place in terms of governance and operational delivery. It is intended to provide transparent information about its financial, governance and operational affairs.

Foreword

The 2023/24 financial year saw the beginning of a challenging period for West Midlands Fire Service in relation to our governance and leadership, one that continued into 2024/25 and at the time of writing, remains subject to ongoing inspection and development. We continue to address the issues that have come to light during this period, drawing upon sector wide expertise through the National Fire Chiefs Council and the Local Government Association for support. The forthcoming Best Value Inspection, commissioned by the Home Secretary, provides the welcome opportunity and next steps in identifying and making any necessary improvements and we are fully committed to working openly, transparently and constructively with the Home Office and inspectors throughout the process.

Confirmation that the Local Government Association will be initiating a Corporate Governance Support Board to provide support to the WMFRA is welcomed. The board will provide support and guidance to identify opportunities for improvement and assurance on the effective governance of the Fire Authority.

We remain confident that West Midlands Fire Service continues to deliver an efficient and effective service to the communities of the West Midlands, including excellent emergency response. The range of services we provide and the work that goes on in the background to deliver these is reflected within this Statement of Assurance, providing the reassurance that in 2023/24, your Fire and Rescue Service has continued to deliver our vision of 'Making the West Midlands, Safer, Stronger and Healthier'.

As part of the latest round of inspections, the end of 2024 saw His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) conclude their inspection of WMFS and we look forward to seeing their findings, conclusions and recommendations. This will provide us with an independent assessment of how we are performing as a service and will be reflected in our 2024/25 Statement of Assurance.

We will always look to celebrate our strengths but not shy away from areas where we can improve, with the Governance Review and the latest round of inspections supporting us to fulfil our ever-present commitment for continuous improvement, and to ensure that services of the highest standards continue to be delivered to the communities of the West Midlands and beyond.

Finance

The WMFRA places significant importance on ensuring that its financial management arrangements are in line with the expectations of a public body. As a public service the Authority are responsible for ensuring that public money is properly accounted for and spent in a way that provides value for money.

Statement of Accounts

The Authority's 2023/24 Statement of Accounts is prepared in accordance with CIPFA/LASAAC Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom, under International Financial Reporting Standards. The Authority's accounts for the financial year 2023/24 consist of the following:

- The Comprehensive Income and Expenditure statement, the Authority's main revenue account, covering income and expenditure on all services
- The Movement in Reserves Statement, which shows movement in the year on different reserves held by the Authority
- The Balance Sheet, which sets out the financial position of the Authority at the 31 March 2024
- The Cash Flow Statement, showing movements in cash and cash equivalents during the year and the cash position at the end of the year
- The Pension Fund Account, which summarises the movements relating to the firefighters' pension schemes

The majority of the net cost of Fire Service expenditure relates to the cost of services, £109.492m. After statutory adjustments, such as the removal of depreciation and impairments and applying International Accounting Standard Nineteen (IAS19) entries in relation to pension costs, the Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement showed a deficit of provision of services of £49.797m and an overall surplus of £7.082m. The total expenditure of the Authority for 2023/24 was £183.704m.

The total income of the Authority in 2023/24 was £133.907m.

Pensions

On 6 April 2023 and 8 September 2023, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities published their responses to the 'McCloud/Sargeant remedy' consultations. The consultations proposed changes to address the discrimination found in the McCloud judgement, in relation to Firefighters Pension transitional projections. Eligible members would be able to choose to receive legacy pension scheme benefits or benefits equivalent to those available under the 2015 reformed scheme for service during the remedy period. The regulations to enact the retrospective remedy came into effect from 1 October 2023.

In respect to the McCloud / Sargeant Ruling and Immediate Detriment, the Service continued to monitor and engage with developments throughout including impacts upon finance forecasts and governance arrangements. The Service is operating in accordance with the 'McCloud' Remedy Period and will be issuing Remedial Service Statements in line with the March 2025 deadline. Immediate detriment has been applied to all affected pre-existing retired members of the Scheme.

Governance

The Authority is required to produce an "Annual Governance Statement" with its audited "Annual Statement of Accounts". The Governance Statement is based on an ongoing process designed to identify and prioritise the risks to the achievement of the Authority's policies, aims and objectives, to evaluate the likelihood of those risks being realised and the impact should they be realised, and to manage them efficiently, effectively and economically.

It explains how our service manages its governance and internal control arrangements and measures the effectiveness of those arrangements.

Governance Assurance

WMFRA is a Joint Authority established under the Local Government Act 1985, amended via "The Fire and Rescue Authority (Membership) Order 2017", which saw the membership of the Authority reduced to 15 Members and its committee structure streamlined, achieving further efficiencies in the provision of effective governance. It is a supervisory body that ensures that WMFS perform efficiently and in the best interests of the public and the community it serves.

WMFRA have statutory responsibilities laid down in legislation including (but not limited to) the:

- Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004
- Civil Contingencies Act 2004
- Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005
- Fire and Rescue Services (Emergencies) (England) Order 2007
- Localism Act 2011

- Fire and Rescue National Framework for England 2018
- The Policing and Crime Act 2017
- The Health and Safety Work Act 1974
- Fire Safety Act 2021

WMFRA comprises fifteen elected Members who represent the seven local authorities that make up the West Midlands in proportion to their size, the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner and two co-opted Members (one representing health and one representing business). The Representative Bodies, namely the Fire Brigades Union, Fire Officer Association, and UNISON, are invited to attend the WMFRA with Special Observer status.

The seven local authorities that make up the West Midlands are Birmingham, Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Walsall, and Wolverhampton.

WMFRA have a Constitution that outlines how it carries out its affairs. It explains how decisions are made and brings together in one document the detailed rules and procedures that govern the behaviour of those who work for or represent the Authority.

The Authority Members have developed and adopted a local Code of Corporate Governance document which incorporates how the Authority meets the seven principles of good governance. The Fire Authority ensures that its governance structures comply with the seven core principles and sub-principles of the CIPFA/SOLACE – 'Delivering Good Governance in Local Government Framework 2016'.

These principles are adhered to via the processes outlined in the Constitution.

To enable the authority to carry out its duties effectively, in addition to meetings of the full Fire Authority there are several committees and regular forums that include:

- Appointments, Standards and Appeals Committee
- Audit and Risk Committee
- Collaboration and Transformation Committee
- Joint Consultative Panel
- Pension Board
- Scrutiny Committee

Additionally, there is a Members Engagement Forum (previously named the Policy Planning Forum prior to June 2023) which is convened on a regular basis. It is attended by all Members of the Fire Authority. It is not a decision-making body but provides a forum for the discussion of important issues affecting the Service prior to formal submission and discussion with Members via the Committee framework as appropriate.

You can find out more about the Fire Authority and its Members on the website, www.wmfs.net. In addition, there is a Committee Management Information System

(CMIS) which provides details of all Authority and Committee meetings, reports, minutes, and records of decisions.

External Audit

The accounts are audited by independent external auditors (Grant Thornton UK LLP) who in addition to auditing the accounts, also provide assurance that the Authority has the correct arrangements in place for securing economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in its use of resources. The full external audit work programme and the risk-based approach are explained in Grant Thornton's Audit Plan. Their findings and their opinion on the Authority's accounts and the value for money is included within the Audit Findings Report.

Their findings and their opinion on the Authority's accounts and value for money arrangements are included within the annual Audit Findings Report, (not published at the time of writing).

On 27 November 2023, Grant Thornton presented to the Audit and Risk Committee an interim Auditor's Annual Report on WMFRA's arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of WMFRA's resources for the financial years 2021/22 and 2022/23. Following this, issues were raised to Grant Thornton in January 2024 and subsequent events arose in the financial year 2024/25 around Value for Money. Grant Thornton have issued a Supplementary Annual Auditor's Report (Value for Money) which outlines their findings and the key risks and recommendations that have been identified, which include statutory recommendations. The report is publicly available in its entirety and is available on CMIS (External Auditors – Value for Money Report, Fire Authority, 25 November 2024).

Internal Audit

Our Internal Audits are carried out by Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, the outcomes of which are reported to the WMFRA Audit and Risk Committee.

Each audit assesses:

- The level of risk to the Authority assigned to each auditable area (high, medium, or low)
- The number and type of recommendations accepted by management
- The level of assurance given to each system under review - Substantial Assurance, Reasonable Assurance (positive opinions), Limited Assurance, No Assurance (negative opinions)

The Annual Internal Audit Plan is agreed by the Committee and progress reported on a quarterly basis. The 2022/23 Annual Internal Audit Report summarised the audit work undertaken during the year which included the following ten areas of review: Freedom of Information, Fixed Asset Accounting, Accounts payable, Budgetary Control, Accounts Receivable, Governance, Risk Management, and Payroll were rated with a

'substantial' level of assurance. Data Protection and Partnerships remained in progress by year-end.

The 2023/24 Annual Internal Annual Audit Plan included the following 10 areas of review:

Seven areas rated with Substantial Assurance:

- Governance
- Data Protection
- Risk Management
- Accounts Payable
- Accounts Receivable
- Fixed Asset Accounting
- Payroll

The level of assurance for Budgetary Control was rated as reasonable.

The level of assurance for Partnerships was rated as limited.

Absence Management remained in progress at year end.

The Internal Auditors confirmed that to date no issues had arisen that would impact upon their annual audit opinion, being able to provide 'reasonable assurance that the Fire Authority has an adequate and effective framework of governance, risk management and control'.

It should be noted that where key issues have been identified over the year, action plans have been produced, and implementation of them will be confirmed, where applicable, during follow-up exercises to be undertaken as part of the internal audit plan for 2024/25.

Other sources of assurance on which the Authority may rely include:

- The work of the External Auditors (currently Grant Thornton)
- The result of any quality accreditation
- The outcome of visits by HM Revenue & Customs
- Other pieces of consultancy or third-party work designed to alert the Authority to areas of improvement
- Other external review agencies

Data Transparency & Accountability

In preparing this Statement of Assurance, the Authority has considered the principles of transparency, promoting openness and accountability through reporting on local decision making, public spending and democratic processes.

All relevant information is published on the West Midlands Fire Service website in line with the Local Government Transparency Code 2015, including information on how the Authority has spent its public money, demonstrating the Authority's commitment to transparency and accountability. This has been developed further through our work to ensure information meets web accessibility requirements.

Operational

Community Risk Management Plan

WMFS implements its Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) in conjunction with its medium-term financial plan and Annual Plan, which together comprise our three-year rolling strategy for implementing our Service Delivery Model.

The Service ensures that our CRMP covers 'at least a three-year time span and [can] be reviewed and revised as often as it is necessary', as required by the Fire and Rescue Service National Framework. The Service is also required to ensure that the CRMP 'reflect(s) effective consultation throughout its development and at all review stages with the community, its workforce and representative bodies and partners' and is 'easily accessible and publicly available'. These requirements are achieved by reviewing and updating the CRMP as a risk analysis on an ongoing basis, and via undertaking a three yearly refresh including public consultation.

Public consultation was carried out over a ten-week period from 3 July to 11 September 2023. Nearly 4,800 members of the pubic completed the survey, together with some 140 of the Service's partner organisations and more than 700 members of WMFS staff. The results of the consultation helped to shape the Service's CRMP planning for 2024 to 2027.

In April 2024, West Midlands Fire Service (WMFS) published its 2024-27 Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) following extensive public consultation, which received nearly 6,000 responses from the public, partners, and staff. Feedback from the consultation led to several key updates, including a review of our Safe and Well content to provide enhanced advice on heatwaves, battery safety, flooding, and wildfire risks. Additionally, we launched dedicated battery safety charging advice on our website.

WMFS has established a National CRMP Working Group to foster collaboration and share best practice across workstreams and challenges in relation to community risk management. The Terms of Reference has been signed off by the group, which has now met twice in 2024, once virtually and once in person at WMFS HQ.

We have continued to prioritise comprehensive risk analysis to ensure an accurate understanding of risks across the West Midlands and to align our resources effectively. Published risk reports include strategic risk and trend analysis, as well as detailed

reports on accidental dwelling fires, false alarms, special service calls, tall building incidents, and shifts. To further support organisational awareness of performance and risk, WMFS maintains Power BI dashboards that display key data and insights.

Mutual Aid Arrangements

WMFRA has mutual aid arrangements in place with all the surrounding Fire and Rescue Services (FRS). These arrangements include the provision of support in the event of large-scale incidents or in instances where resources of an FRS may be greatly reduced. WMFRA is a partner in the West Midlands Conurbation Local Resilience Forum (LRF), the statutory multi-agency partnership which ensures all category one and two responders including emergency services, fulfil their roles and responsibilities as set out in the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. The forum enables planning to be in place in preparation for localised incidents and emergencies which may impact upon the communities within the West Midlands.

In parallel, the Police and Crime Act 2017 places a duty on Fire, Police and Ambulance services to collaborate to improve the efficiency and the effectiveness of emergency services. WMFS work with partners to optimise multi-agency response and resilience through enhanced working relationships, in line with the Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Programme (JESIP). The Service continues to work closely with West Midlands Police and other partners in fulfilling its responsibilities under the Prevent Strategy.

The Service supports the UK-wide emergency approach as part of National Resilience and the Service has enhanced capabilities to support responses to major emergencies such as terrorist attacks, industrial and domestic accidents, and natural disasters, providing support UK wide and beyond. The Service is a partner in the Multi-Agency Specialist Assessment Team (MASAT) which provides initial assessment of potential Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear or Explosive (CBRNE) incidents. Our Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) and International Search and Rescue (ISAR) Teams provide enhanced capabilities for a wide variety of incidents including rescues from collapsed buildings, floods, height, and confined spaces.

Members of WMFS have been deployed as part of the United Kingdom Search and Rescue (UK ISAR) to countries in response to earthquakes, hurricanes, floods and wildfires. During 2023/24 this has included responding as part of the UK ISAR Flood Response Team to the devastating storms that swept through Malawi in Southern Africa and joining the deployment, sanctioned by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, to Morocco following the devastating 6.8 magnitude earthquake.

Health & Safety and Wellbeing

The Service is committed to complying with its duties under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and associated legislation for health, safety, and well-being. In line with delivering a “safer, stronger and healthier West Midlands”, it is important to maintain focus on ensuring that the Service continues to develop a positive approach to employee health, safety, and wellbeing and to protect others from harm from its

activities. To this end, the aim is for an assertive, effective, and safe approach when responding to emergencies.

The Plan Do Check Act (PDCA) cycle is used by West Midlands Fire Service (WMFS) for continual improvement. The PDCA cycle incorporates: Determining and assessing health and safety risks and opportunities and establishing objectives and processes necessary for meeting the services legal requirements. Monitoring and measuring the activities and processes in relation to objectives and reporting the results, taking actions to continually improve performance.

During 2023/24 WMFS have:

- **Plan**: 2023/24 concentrated on ensuring the competency of our staff. As such, a health and safety training framework has been developed and externally verified. The plan was to deliver this utilising internal resource. This ensures that role-specific training is delivered with the correct level of competence, further enhanced with a fire service background.
- **Do**: The strategic and local HSW Committees' Terms of Reference have been reviewed and adjusted to ensure continual governance. Objectives continue to be set locally, following health and safety audits and through local HSW Committees. Delivery of the health and safety training framework has commenced, with a delivery schedule based on risk.
- **Check**: Following the successful rollout of the new health and safety audit process, this was repeated in 2023/24, so all stations have had two audits. This is to provide an overview of assurance levels. In detail, this includes levels of improvement, identification of non-compliance, staff engagement and supported with a detailed action plan.
- **Act**: Our new health and safety performance indicators have now been embedded into the Service. This has highlighted trends, where projects and action plans have been developed to address these. This also includes findings from audits, highlighted above.

Wellbeing

This year we took part in the Midlands Mental Health Productivity Pilot with Coventry University. This benchmarked our business and 800 others in the Midlands against the wellbeing standard Thrive. We provided one of the best mental health provisions in the Midlands, which we are very proud of. We also undertook our first employee wellbeing survey, which we repeated six months later to see progress.

We continue to review our Occupational Health services to ensure we were meeting the demands of the Service. We also brought in various mental health training packages.

We trained 15 Cancer Champions through MacMillian to support employees and promote screening.

People

Ensuring our People Policies are user friendly, easy to understand, fit for purpose, and are fair and consistent has been a priority for the Service's People Programme. In doing so, we've engaged with Trade Unions, Middle Managers, Network Groups and a broad range of employees, to ensure they have been able to provide input and feedback into the development of our policies. This has led to the launch of new revised policies including Attendance Management, Dignity at Work, and Family Leave.

The 'All Hands to the Pumps' study saw us embark on sector-leading research with the University of Birmingham, an ongoing study which seeks to understand more about how the Service can be an inclusive environment in which all staff can thrive, with an emphasis on the positive contributions that all genders can make to creating a supportive and inclusive workforce culture.

We Are WMFS

The launch of the 'We Are' campaign has been all about exploring celebrating how our people, supported by our equipment, vehicles and systems, make our communities safer. It is about our people's expertise, dedication, and compassion. It's about the difference our people make, every day, to people's lives. The launch of the 'We Are' campaign has also seen the refresh of our visual identity and brand to help ensure that everything created by WMFS, or any of its staff, reflects a consistent, professional, and approachable image, one that ensures that our materials are easily recognisable, aligned with our values, and create a positive impression.

In doing so, we are committed to ensuring that all of our digital content is accessible and inclusive, helping us to meet our legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) Accessibility Regulations 2018.

External Operational Assurance

- HMICFRS: Report on Values and Culture in Fire and Rescue Services

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) published a spotlight report focusing on the values and culture in the fire and rescue service, the findings of which were difficult to read with reports of widespread bullying, harassment, discrimination, misogyny, racism, and homophobia across the national fire and rescue sector.

The report makes a series of recommendations intended to assist fire and rescue services to improve values, culture, fairness, and diversity. We accepted all of the recommendations made in full, with 20 WMFS specific recommendations (15 recommendations within the report applied to other organisations). Of these, 14 recommendations were achieved in year. As of March 2024, the Service had a plan in place to achieve each of the remaining six recommendations in due course. The Service's pro-active delivery against the recommendations was reflected in HMICFRS noting our approach as best practice for the sector (see next section).

- HMICFRS: Thematic Inspection of the Handling of Misconduct in Fire and Rescue Services

In July 2023, the Home Secretary commissioned HMICFRS to undertake a thematic inspection of the handling of misconduct in fire and rescue services in England. WMFS was one of ten fire and rescue services to take part in this inspection. Following our participation the Service received a hot debrief from HMICFRS in January 2024 which was encouraging and set out the following key findings:

- Staff felt that the culture within the Service was improving, and that it is a positive place to work.
- We carry out thorough disciplinary investigations, with good record keeping.
- A quarter of all disciplinary cases involved trainee / developing firefighters.
- We need to ensure we retain all information regarding grievances and make all reasonable attempts to resolve cases on an informal basis, where possible.
- We provide sufficient training for individuals to carry out investigations, which include ACAS and Crucial Conversation training.
- The Service worked well with representative bodies and our networking groups.

All of the key findings have been addressed through the implementation of a variety of initiatives, including the development and progress of our Inclusion Action Plan, a significant piece of work culminating it its launch in June 2024.

It was pleasing to note that the Service was recognised for two areas considered best practice for the sector, namely:

- The provision of the Dispute Resolution Report which provides the Fire Authority trend analysis of all cases (a report that is publicly available, covering a six month reporting period).
- Our approach to embedding the recommendations of the HMICFRS spotlight report on fire and rescue service culture (as detailed above).

Internal Operational Assurance

The Chief Fire Officer leads the senior management team which oversees the shape and direction of the Service and ensures that it is adhering to our statutory responsibilities. Through the application of robust project management, the senior management team oversee the delivery of our strategy, strategic objectives and strategic annual priorities. These set the context for the three-year rolling strategy, known in 2023/24 as ‘Our Plan’, which is published as a means of outlining how we will address the risks identified within the CRMP to the public.

In recognition of both the changing CRMP, the role of a fire and rescue service and government expectations, and following a review of our CRMP undertaken throughout 2020, and a period of public consultation in late 2020, the Fire Authority approved the progression of six CRMP Objectives, namely:

- Risk-Based Crewing
- Dynamic Mobilising
- Automatic Fire Alarms
- Blended Fleet
- Reducing Health Inequalities
- Emerging Risks

The CRMP Objectives continued to be delivered throughout 2023/24, remaining a priority within our Annual Plan, and maintaining a focus on transforming the services we deliver to our communities. It should be noted that these projects and objectives concluded with the end of the three-year planning cycle and have not continued as separate projects, for example, the Risk-Based Crewing pilots have ceased and the Reducing Health Inequalities objective now forming business as usual for the Service.

As already reflected within the CRMP section of this document, 2023/24 represented the third year since public consultation and its last full refresh. As a result, the CRMP was subject to a full refresh in addition to the continual reviewing and updating of the risk analysis. This three-yearly refresh included public consultation which was carried out in late summer of 2023.

The Three-Year Rolling Strategy for 2023-26 and Annual Plan 2023/24 re-affirmed the Authority's vision, 'Making the West Midlands Safer, Stronger, and Healthier'. It set out the three-year strategic objectives, set out below, and refreshed the priorities for delivery within the Annual Plan, as well as noting the ongoing progress of the CRMP Objectives.

The three-year strategic objectives:

- **Response**: Dealing excellently with incidents
- **Prevention**: Delivering services that reduce risk and support safer and healthier communities
- **Protection**: Protecting life and property to make businesses stronger and communities safer

The Strategic Priorities for the period 2023/24 included:

Response Priorities

- We will respond with the resources you need when you need then to protect what matters to you, to save life, reduce harm and protect homes and businesses
- We will be ready to respond in an assertive, effective and safe way to meet our vision
- We will lead rescue operations, working with others to help make you safer
- We are ready to respond locally, national and internationally

Prevention Priorities

- We will prevent fires, road traffic collisions and other emergencies
- We will focus on reducing health inequalities for our most vulnerable as a means of reducing risk and vulnerability to fires and other emergencies
- We will educate the community to reduce their risk and vulnerability to fires and other emergencies
- We will collaborate, and work in partnership with other organisations to reduce the risk and vulnerability to fires and other emergencies

Protection Priorities

- We will protect our communities by targeting high-risk buildings through intelligence and data
- We will promote economic growth through education and engagement with businesses
- We will carry out our responsibilities under relevant legislation to consult and enforce to make people safer
- We will reduce disruption to businesses and communities of West Midlands
- We will implement learning from national, local and sector-led reviews

People Priorities

We are committed to working together to make WMFS a great place to work for our people and for the benefit of our community, achieved through:

- Recruiting, developing and championing talented people enabling diversity and embracing difference, enabling them to reach their potential.
- Enabling a positive working environment for all our staff and holding all to account for maintaining our core values
- Enabling and developing leaders at all levels
- Valuing the contribution of all of our people allowing everybody's voice to be heard.
- Ensuring our people know that their health, safety and wellbeing is important and will be prioritised by themselves and the service.
- Being uncompromising in our commitment to Diversity, Inclusion, Cohesion and Equality, ensuring the Service is representative of our community and we have access to the widest talent pool.
- Creating an environment of personal growth and development which will ensure the service can continually adapt and improve.

Digital Priorities

We aim to enhance and transform services to our communities, underpinning them with innovative and digital solutions, enabling the delivery of the strategy through:

- enabling our workforce to have the best most up to date information to keep them and our communities safer.
- ensuring that we are as efficient and effective as we can be as a service
- sharing data with other blue light services and our partners to ensure better outcomes for our communities.
- engaging with our diverse communities in new ways to help them remain informed and stay safe.

The performance of WMFS during 2023/24

Staff skills competency, values and behaviours are at the very core of our service delivery. Regardless of role, we want all staff to understand how significant their contribution is and how it fits into the bigger picture in terms of helping us to achieve our response, prevention, and protection priorities. Embracing awareness of value for money and progression of a digital approach to working underpins our service improvements and cultural development.

Response

WMFS knows that its five-minute response is based on evidence and knowledge of risk and that it saves lives, homes, and businesses. We have continued to deliver within our defined response times throughout 2023/24, albeit under increasing budgetary and staffing pressures which has required the Service and its staff to be ever flexible and proactive in ways in which it can continue to deliver its risk-based attendance standards.

During 2023/24 our Fire Control handled 55,464 calls, in an average of 92 seconds per call. Our firefighters attended 28,172 incidents and they arrived at the most serious in an average of just 4 minutes 54 secs. Having experienced two years where the number of calls and incidents attended had reduced as a result of the direct impacts of the Covid pandemic, 2023/24 saw a similar return to pre-covid numbers as observed during 2022/23.

People who use their smartphone to call us on 999 can also be asked to send photos or videos of what they can see. We came up with the idea of '999Eye' and developed it with Capita and it is now embedded within our call handling procedures, proving to be an invaluable tool providing officers with greater situational awareness and enhancing decision-making processes. It was used 17,912 times throughout 2023/24 to help operators in our Fire Control ensure that through dynamic mobilising, the most appropriate and proportionate initial response is sent to incidents. 999Eye was used 8000 times more than the previous year, with it used at approximately 50% of all incidents by quarter 4 of 2023/24. The application of 999eye has also supported our CRMP projects and has proven instrumental in a number of pilots whereby new approaches to staffing and our service delivery model are trialled and tested for effectiveness.

Prevention

Our prevention work focuses on reducing people's vulnerability to the type of emergencies to which the Service responds. WMFS also have specialist prevention and partnership teams who support its firefighters in reducing anti-social behaviour, including arson, and improving road safety. The Prevention Team were reviewed during 2023/24 taking stock of the local, regional and national environment post-COVID and to support the Team to continue to deliver prevention activities efficiently and effectively, with a stronger focus on performance and ensuring greater alignment to the strategic Prevention objectives.

WMFS data shows a link between the health status of an individual and Fire and Rescue related risks such as fire. This is supported by strong correlations between health conditions such as mental illness, physical disability, or mobility issues, with both the increased risk of fire and severity of such incidents on the individual in relation to injuries. These are set out in the Marmot principles.

The Service continues to use a targeted person-centred approach to its prevention interventions. Our Strategy continues to support the principle of 'upstream activity', seeking to identify and tackle the causes of preventable death and related injury, through collaborative working with system partners, which underpins our prevention activity.

Through the Reducing Health Inequalities CRMP objective, we continued to focus on delivering a co-ordinated suite of activities that aim to reduce health inequalities across the life course of a vulnerable person and enhancing our upstream approach to firefighting.

The use of technology has not only enabled us to continue delivering 'virtual' Safe and Wells throughout the pandemic, it has also allowed us to adapt our ways of working and how we can deliver Safe and Wells, using a combined approach of face-to-face and remote Safe and Wells.

All Safe and Wells are always prioritised based on the risk identified at the point of referral to the Service to ensure that we continue to identify those most at risk and vulnerable to fire, with face-to-face Safe and Well visits offered to those rated as most vulnerable or whenever a remote Safe and Well identifies one is required. The Online Home Fire Safety Check (National Fire Chiefs Council) also provides opportunities for low-risk individuals to receive advice and guidance online.

In 2023/24, we carried out more than 20,000 Safe & Well visits, of which nearly 600 were carried out remotely. Over 55% of Safe and Wells originated from partner referrals.

We have handed out over 15,000 pieces of equipment such as smoke alarms, hearing impaired alarms, mailbox protectors and fire-retardant bedding.

When delivering road safety prevention, our firefighters and Road Casualty Reduction Team engaged with more than 60,000 people throughout 2023/24, working closely with partners and using a wide variety of activities, whilst delivering road safety prevention.

Protection

Our protection work focuses on helping businesses to thrive, making the West Midlands safer & stronger. We aim to ensure fire safety compliance to protect, staff, customers and communities through our engagement, education and sometimes enforcement. We have reviewed our Safe and Strong visits to assist operational personnel to deliver high quality Safe and Strong engagement in the community, and to identify and reduce risk in businesses in line with our CRMP. The aim of Safe and Strongs is to support and educate businesses to reduce the likelihood of fire. In 2023/24 we carried out 2,316 Safe and Strong visits providing advice to businesses regarding fire prevention, protecting staff, visitors, buildings and contents.

In 2023/24 we recorded 360 accidental fires in non-domestic properties. We attended 7,298 false alarms caused by fire alarm systems, over 500 more than in 2022/23. We have continued to develop and adapt how we respond to these type of fire alarms. Our Fire Safety Advisor Team includes three 'Business Support' vehicles and a team of advisors dedicated to reducing the number of 'unwanted fire signals' from automatic fire alarms (AFA). This is complimented by our staff in Fire Control using a system known as 'call challenge' as part of our dynamic mobilising approach to check whether we need to respond, or it is a false alarm. This has led to an amended approach to our response to AFA incidents at student accommodation and implementation of a more appropriate response to AFAs at hospitals. The team also respond to reported fire safety concerns across the West Midlands, ensuring risks are assessed to safeguard the communities.

We have made significant progress in implementing the recommendations of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase 1. We continue to review how well these recommendations are embedded and remain committed to making the necessary improvements to strive for excellence. Our focus on embedding and seeking continuous improvement in those areas, including:

- Improvements to the provision of life saving guidance and communication of the control room and Incident Commander
- Creation of a dedicated Fire Safety Portal for Responsible Persons of Tall Buildings training packages for operational staff and Fire Control
- Improving our approach to how we support the command structure at incidents.

- We have reviewed and updated all of our tall building policies aligned to the national Fire Standards.

The Phase 2 Recommendations that were released in late 2024 have resulted in the Service carrying out a comprehensive gap analysis against those recommendations of our current practices, procedures and policies. This has resulted in the responsible Head of Section (HoS) creating an action plan to support the implementation of those recommendations into the Service over the coming months.

How do WMFS do it?

The successful delivery of 'Our Plan' is enabled through a robust project management framework that has been developed by the Service; one that provides the strategic link between our CRMP and operational front line delivery model.

Work is underway to build upon and continue to improve how we deliver the work of our programmes and projects further, with a view to establishing a clear business planning cycle allowing for greater strategic and financial alignment.

But we would not be able to do what we do, delivering services of the highest standards to our communities, including first class emergency response, without our people. That is why we recognise that the delivery of our services, and ultimately our strategy, is best achieved through a motivated, engaged, and thriving workforce. When our people feel that WMFS is a great place to work, then our communities are the beneficiaries.

Our People Programme sets out its aims to:

- Ensure our workforce reflects the diverse communities it serves at all levels within the service
- Create an environment which enables everyone to thrive at work
- Ensure everyone knows how they contribute to the delivery of excellent services
- Ensure a safe and healthy place to work for all

There are a range of priorities aligned to these aims including:

- the undertaking of a comprehensive review of our approach to training and development, including the refresh of our trainee firefighter development programme and how we train and assess our incident commanders
- the development of Career Development Pathways and our approaches to talent management and progression
- reviewing our approaches to attendance management and how we can further understand the issues affecting our workforce and ensure our provision of support services, from prevention through to postvention are suitable and support positive wellbeing at work
- overseeing the introduction of DBS checks for all staff, meeting the recommendations as set out nationally by HMICFRS
- the continuing development of our Inclusion Action Plan

Our digital and data strategic priorities reflect how we are enhancing and transforming our services to our communities, by underpinning them with innovative and digital solutions, increasing opportunity for our communities to access our services including the most vulnerable. These digital ways of working increasingly support our staff to operate in a flexible and agile way, providing new, different and more efficient approaches to delivering services to our diverse local communities.

Statement of Assurance 2024/25

The next reporting year, 2024/25, will be the first year of our new three-year strategy. It builds on and replaces our previous three-year rolling strategy, which we called 'Our Plan' and published annually. It is an approach that is designed to be more clearly forward looking, one that shows you not just what we aim to achieve, but also how we will deliver it and how we will measure success. The strategy is designed for our communities and draws upon your responses to our public consultation carried out in the summer of 2023. You told us you wanted more community engagement, more safety advice, and a focus on new areas such as climate change, and this will be reflected in the work we are delivering over 2024/25 and beyond. During 2024/25 we have developed and launched our Organisational Priorities; priority areas of work that are critical to the successful delivery of our services. These include the 'One Team' priority which strives to bring the organisation together as one team cohesively, to engender a culture which nurtures and celebrates how everyone contributes to the collective outcomes of WMFS to make the West Midlands safer, stronger and healthier.

We are confident that as your fire and rescue service, we continue to deliver services of the highest standards, including excellent emergency response. We will be able to report how we continue to deliver improvements across the Service, including how we support our people to succeed, by growing an inclusive and collaborative workplace, one in which our staff feel valued and able to thrive in a positive, professional culture focussed in providing effective and highly regarded services to the public.

It is this approach that has seen the Service be rated as number one in The Inclusive Top 50 UK Employers List for 2022/23 and 2023/24, and we will be able to report how we have been rated as number five for 2024/25.

The recommendations of Phase 2 of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry were released in late 2024, having resulted in the Service carrying out a comprehensive gap analysis against those recommendations of our current practices, procedures and policies. The responsible Head of Section (HoS) has created an action plan to support the implementation of those recommendations into the Service.

August 2024 will have seen the publication of the HMICFRS Thematic Inspection within the report 'Standards of Behaviour: The Handling of Misconduct in Fire and Rescue Services' (available in full via the HMICFRS website), and the next statement will reflect how we welcomed the report, having engaged in the inspection openly and transparently with a view to continuous improvement accepting its recommendations in full. At the time of writing there is some work already in sharp focus, and some new strands of work for us to consider going forwards.

HMICFRS will have also completed their onsite inspection of the Service by the end of December 2024, and we will be able to report on the findings of the HMICFRS and their independent assessment on the efficiency and effectiveness of the Service.

We also acknowledge that the challenges facing the Service have continued into 2024/25, with the commissioning of a Best Value Inspection and the establishment of a Corporate Governance Support Board, we will be able to report on how we have

proactively engaged with the Home Office and Local Government Association remaining committed to openness and transparency throughout.

Critically, we will be able to report how the services we deliver have continued to be of the highest standards, with the independent inspections and assessments supporting us to continue to improve as your fire and rescue service.