

WMFS
West Midlands
Fire Service

Statement of Assurance

2024/25

As approved 16 February 2026

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Statement of Assurance 2024/25

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 year 2024/25 was one of real challenge but also significant progress for West Midlands Fire Service (WMFS). This is reflected in this Statement of Assurance.

WMFS and West Midlands Fire Authority (WMFRA) came under sharp scrutiny. We have been open and honest about the challenges, but also unwavering in how we will tackle them together. By drawing on sector expertise and support through the National Fire Chiefs' Council and the Local Government Association (LGA) we are confident that improvements are being made very day.

We established a Corporate Governance Improvement Board, comprising expert independent members sourced by the LGA, plus WMFRA and WMFS members. Together, they support the authority to create and deliver a robust governance improvement plan, and to scrutinise and oversee the authority's improvement journey.

We also welcome the additional scrutiny of a Best Value Inspection, which will report its findings in 2026. They will complement the work of the Corporate Governance Improvement Board and provide opportunities to show our strengths, learn from the past and keep improving.

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) visited in October 2024 for our third scheduled inspection. We are proud that the inspectors were 'pleased with the performance of West Midlands Fire Service and the positive and constructive way in which staff worked with us'. Their findings highlighted a number of important strengths, with the service graded 'good' in several areas.

The dedication and professionalism of our people remained constant in 2024/25. They ensured our service to the public never faltered and that we continued to deliver on our vision of making the West Midlands safer, stronger and healthier.

It was also a year of milestones: WMFS 50th anniversary; the 10th anniversary of Staffordshire and West Midlands Fire Control; the 40th of our transport and engineering team.

Working with our people, partners and stakeholders, we will continue to identify and implement ways to improve our services for our communities in the years ahead.

Finance

The WMFRA places significant importance on ensuring that its financial management arrangements are in line with the statutory requirements 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 2024/25 Statement of Accounts are 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 2024/25 consist of the following:

- The Comprehensive Income and Expenditure statement, the Authority's main revenue account, covering income and expenditure on all services throughout the financial year.
- The Movement in Reserves Statement, which shows movement in the year on different reserves held by the Authority
- The Statement of Financial Position, which sets out the assets and liabilities of the Authority at the 31 March 2025
- 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, £116.614m. 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 £9.560m and an overall surplus of £172.662m. The deficit on provision of services was made up of total expenditure of the Authority for 2024/25 of £189.838m and total income of the Authority in 2024/25 of £180.278m. After favourable adjustments of £7.775m between the accounting basis and the funding basis under regulations, there was a reduction of £1.785m in usable reserves (from £28.038m as at 31st March 2024 to £26.253m as at 31st March 2025).

The fully audited accounts were agreed on 16 January 2026 by the Audit & Risk Committee and can be found here. The draft unaudited statement of accounts for 2024/25 were published in June 2025.

Procurement

It is the strategy of West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority (WMFRA) that all expenditure or income, incurred or received, in relation to any contract into which the Service enters, shall be processed in accordance with this policy and the Authority's Financial Regulations. The aim is to ensure a consistent value for money approach to procurement in all areas of activity, in a way that maintains public accountability and complies with all UK Procurement Legislation and minimises the risk of any allegations of fraud or malpractice.

The Authority's Procurement Procedures Policy is available in full on our website, www.wmfs.net, having been updated in February 2025 in line with changes introduced under the Procurement Act 2023.

Pensions

West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority is the Scheme Manager for the Firefighters' Pension Schemes, which means it is responsible for ensuring the proper management and administration of that scheme. The Chief Fire Officer has delegated responsibility as the Scheme Manager, and the schemes are administered by our Pensions and Payroll team.

McCloud Sargent Remedy

The organisation is continuing to comply with the requirements of the McCloud Sargent Remedy Period and issued Remedial Service Statements (RSS) to affected members in accordance with the March 2025 deadline.

Following the issue of RSSs for the period of discrimination (remedy) **1 April 2015 to 31 March 2022**, the organisation informed members impacted by the remedy period that

they will be rolled back to their legacy scheme for their membership during the 7 years. Due to the differences in contribution rates within the Firefighters' Pension Schemes (FPS), the choice triggered a contribution adjustment.

Eligible members were able to choose to receive legacy pension scheme benefits or benefits equivalent to those available under the reformed pension scheme. This choice will continue to be offered to members each year post RSSs being issued or at retirement on what is known as Deferred Choice Underpin (DCU).

Immediate Detriment provisions have been applied to all eligible members of the Scheme who retired prior to the implementation of the Remedy.

Firefighters' Pension Scheme 2006 (the modified scheme)

Remedy for retained firefighters (Matthews) all affected members have been contacted by way of a second options exercise to allow the in-scope members the opportunity to purchase pension entitlement as a special member of the FPS 2006.

Governance

The Authority is required to produce an "Annual Governance Statement" alongside 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 and impact of those risks being 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. It explains how the Authority has complied with the Code of Corporate Governance, itself required to be consistent with the principles of the revised CIPFA/SOLACE Framework 2016 (published by CIPFA in association with the International Federation of Accountants (IFAC) – Delivering Good Governance in Local Government.

The 2024/25 Annual Governance Statement explains how the Authority has complied with the Code and met the requirements of the Accounts and Audit (England) Regulations 2015, regulation 6 which requires the Authority to prepare an Annual Governance Statement. The statement also considers significant governance issues that arose during 2024/25, and the arrangements that have been put in place to make improvements. This includes decision making and associated identification of risk and risk mitigation by way of assurance.

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 (who has voting rights) and two co-opted Members (who do not have voting rights). There are also four positions reserved for Representative Bodies with 'Special Observer' status.

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

WMFRA has a Constitution that outlines how it carries out its affairs. It explains how decisions are made and consolidates the 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, most recently refreshed in February 2024, 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 (merged into the Scrutiny Committee as of the June 2025 Annual General Meeting)
- Joint Consultative Panel
- Pension Board
- Scrutiny Committee

Additionally, the Members Engagement Forum is convened on a regular basis which is open to 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.

Governance Improvement Journey

A range of governance failings and weaknesses occurring during 2024 were highlighted, specifically through a Section 5 Report issued by the Authority's Monitoring Officer in October 2024, and more widely in the report issued by our external auditors in November 2024 (detailed above). Both reports are publicly available via our Committee Management Information System.

These included statutory recommendations and significant weaknesses in the:

- Failure to undertake necessary background recruitment checks in relation to the former Chief Fire Officer as part of the recruitment process
- Suspension of a Statutory officer outside the requirements of the Authority's constitution
- Appointment of senior officers outside the constitutional requirements
- Failure to properly appoint an officer to a Statutory Officer role in line with the constitution
- Postponement of a public authority meeting outside of constitutional requirements
- Failure to complete staff DBS checks within expected timeframes

The Authority and Service have accepted all the recommendations made by our external auditors, and work continues to address their recommendations.

Best Value Inspection

On 7 November 2024, the Minister of State for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention, confirmed the commissioning of a Best Value Inspection of WMFRA governance. In July 2025, the Parliament Under-Secretary of State for Building Safety, Fire and Local Growth, announced in a written statement the formal launch of the Best Value Inspection, an inspection which will consider the WMFRA's compliance with its Best Value duties under section 3 of the Local Government Act 1999, to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness, with a focus on areas of governance, leadership, driving change, culture, and external scrutiny.

The inspection team were appointed on 15 July 2025, with Fenella Morris KC appointed as lead inspector. Letters appointing the inspectors are publicly available via the gov.uk website. Annex 2 of each letter sets out the scope of the inspection.

It is anticipated that the inspection will deliver its recommendations during the first quarter of 2026.

Further information on best value standards and interventions is available via the gov.uk website.

Corporate Governance Improvement Board

To more immediately address the governance issues that have been identified, WMFRA, with the support of the Local Government Association (LGA) established a Corporate Governance Improvement Board which underpins its commitment to strong and effective governance of WMFS.

The board and proposed terms of reference were approved at the full meeting of WMFRA on 17 February 2025 (report is available here). The board provides oversight, challenge, and support to the authority as it considers any improvements identified following ongoing inspections and reviews. The board is independently chaired by Zoe Billingham CBE, who brings a wealth of fire and rescue, inspection and governance experience to the role. A full breakdown of the membership of the board is available within the report that was submitted to the Fire Authority in February 2025 and is referenced above.

The work of the board has been informed by a preliminary governance review lead by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny and funded by the LGA. This review, which can be read in full here, includes assessment of existing policies, interviewing key personnel, and providing recommendations on governance arrangements. Using this information, the CGIB has created a comprehensive Governance Improvement Plan, which can be found on the service website. As we move forward, the board will support the authority and service to implement and embed the actions within that plan. The

board will also support the authority to deliver against any recommendations made as part of the Best Value Inspection.

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 Audit Findings Report and Auditor's Annual Report, (at the time of writing, the most recently published report covers 2023/24 and was submitted to the February 2025 meeting of the Audit & Risk Committee).

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 with subsequent events arising in the financial year 2024/25 around Value for Money. Grant Thornton issued a Supplementary Annual Auditor's Report (Value for Money) outlining 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). The Authority took steps to address a number of these recommendations throughout the remainder of 2024/25, with a Recommendations Update Report provided to WMFRA on 7 April 2025 . As of November 2025, only one of these recommendations remains to be addressed, which will be completed upon adoption of an updated Fire Authority Constitution in February 2026.

Grant Thornton presented the most recent Audit Findings Report, for the year ended 31 March 2024, at the Audit & Risk Committee in February 2025, which included the final statement of accounts 2023-2024.

In relation to the financial statements of WMFRA for the year ended 31 March 2024, a Local Government Letter of Representation was issued by the Interim Head of Finance and Procurement (Treasurer) and the Chair of Audit & Risk Committee. This set out to express an opinion as to whether the Authority's financial statements gave a true and fair view in accordance with the relevant standards and applicable law. The external auditors, Grant Thornton, issued a report on the audit of the financial statements for the

same period, setting out the auditor's opinion that the financial statements. The letter and report are publicly available via the February 2025 meeting of the Audit & Risk Committee.

At the time of writing, the Audit Findings Report and Auditor's Annual Report (Value for Money Report) for the year 2024/25 and final statement of accounts continue to be worked upon and, along with associated documents, are not available at the time of writing. These will be provided in due course and upon publication, will subsequently be added as an addendum to this Statement of Assurance for the purpose of openness and transparency, and ensuring all relevant information covering this period is readily available.

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 or No Assurance (negative opinions)

The Annual Internal Audit Plan is agreed by the Committee and progress reported on a quarterly basis.

The 2023/24 Annual Internal Audit Report summarised the audit work undertaken during the year which included the following ten areas of review: Accounts Payable, Accounts Receivable, Data Protection, Fixed Asset Accounting, Governance, Payroll, and Risk Management were all rated with a 'substantial' level of assurance. The level of assurance for Budgetary Control was rated as reasonable, and Partnerships was rated as limited. Absence Management remained in progress at year end, and subsequently the level of assurance rated as limited, in the September 2024 update to the Committee.

The 2024/25 Annual Internal Annual Audit Plan included the following 10 areas of review:

Six areas rated with a Substantial level of assurance:

- Accounts Payable

- Budgetary Control
- Data Protection
- Fixed Asset Accounting / Asset Planning
- Payroll
- Risk Management

One area rated with a Reasonable level of assurance:

- Accounts Receivable

Two areas rated with a Limited level of assurance:

- Absence Management (as reported in September 2024)
- Disclosure and Barring Service

The Internal Auditors set out their Internal Audit Opinion in the Annual Internal Audit Report 2024/25, (Audit & Risk Committee, June 2025), stating: 'It has been a challenging year for the Fire Authority, and it has experienced a number of significant and high-profile governance issues. As a result of which, Internal Audit are unable to provide reasonable assurance that the Fire Authority has an adequate and effective framework of governance, risk management and control'.

The factors influencing the Internal Audit Opinion are detailed within page 3 of the Annual Internal Audit Report.

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 2025/26.

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.

Relevant information is published on the West Midlands Fire Service website in line with the Local Government Transparency Code 2015, demonstrating the Authority's commitment to transparency and accountability, including how the Authority has spent its public money, details of tenders or contracts over £5,000, and our use of local authority land (the premises we own, and in what capacity). The transparency pages on our website include information on:

- Documents (covering a wide range of topics)
- Freedom of Information (searchable knowledge database)
- Legal, Terms and Service Policy Pages
- Procurement and Contract Opportunities

This has been developed further through our work to ensure information meets web accessibility requirements.

Our website also includes a wide selection of key policies that are publicly available.

Operational

Community Risk Management Plan

There has been continued delivery of the 2023–2026 CRMP, through Prevention, Protection, and Response workstreams. 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 Road traffic collisions, Secondary Fires and Special Service Calls. To further support organisational awareness of performance and risk, WMFS maintains Power BI dashboards that display key data and insights.

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. WMFS arranged a second conference style workshop in June 2025 to share best practice in relation to key themes such as AI and future risk forecasting.

We have launched a comprehensive Service Delivery Model (SDM) Review, to ensure we are aligning resources to community risk and future risk. We have developed the terms of reference, success measures, and methodology for the review and the planning assumptions. Extensive data has already been collected and analysed.

Engaged with operational staff, trade unions, and the Fire Authority through structured workshops, Mesh updates, and internal briefings has taken place.

We have developed a long-term (20-year) Community Risk Forecast (CRF), identifying emerging and chronic risk trends across societal, technological, environmental, and demographic themes. This will form part of our public consultation from January 2026 to ensure it is robust and considers all relevant risk areas.

CRMP analysis has been closely linked and informed key organisational priorities throughout 2024/25 including the Estates Improvement Programme and the vehicle replacement programme to ensure alignment between risk, resource planning, and future investment.

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. In recent years this has included responding as part of the UK ISAR Flood Response Team to the devastating storms that swept through Malawi in Southern Africa, joining the deployment, sanctioned by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, to Morocco following the devastating 6.8 magnitude earthquake, and deploying to Türkiye as part of the UKs response to the devastating earthquakes that struck the south of the country and Syria.

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 Service’s legal requirements. Monitoring and measuring the activities and processes in relation to objectives and reporting the results, taking actions to continually improve performance.

During 2024/25, WMFS have:

- **Plan**: continued to concentrate 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. Training supervisory officers has provided a greater level of understanding in relation to health and safety. Leaders within the Service will undertake training through 2025/26.
- **Do**: The strategic and local Health, Safety & Wellbeing (HSW) Committees’ Terms of Reference have been reviewed and adjusted to ensure continual governance. The strategic health and safety committee is chaired by a Brigade Manager highlighting the importance the service puts into the health and safety of its employees. 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**: Health and safety audits have continued throughout the service, following the rollout audits through the previous year, stations continue to be audited. This has now been extended to include training facilities, furthermore non-operational areas will be inspected. All areas will receive an action plan that includes levels of improvement, identification of non-compliance, staff engagement and supported with a detailed action plan.
- **Act**: Our health and safety performance indicators are now key to the identification of assurance and improvement. This continues to highlight trends, where projects and action plans have been developed to address these. This also includes findings from audits, highlighted above.

Wellbeing

Annual Wellbeing Report Review: Strengthening Support Around Death in Service

Over the past year, we have taken meaningful steps to enhance our support for colleagues and families affected by death in service. Recognising the profound impact such events can have, we focused on strengthening both emotional and practical support mechanisms across the organisation.

One of the key developments was the introduction of Grief First Aiders, trained in partnership with Cruse Bereavement Support. These individuals are now equipped to offer compassionate, informed support to colleagues navigating grief, helping to foster a more understanding and responsive workplace culture.

We also refreshed the training for our Family Contact Support Officers, ensuring they are well-prepared to provide sensitive and effective assistance to bereaved families. This update reflects our commitment to continuous improvement and to maintaining the highest standards of care during difficult times.

In addition, we hosted a Mental Health and Wellbeing Day for the wider leadership team, creating space for reflection, learning, and open dialogue around mental health. This event helped to reinforce the importance of wellbeing at every level of leadership and encouraged a more proactive approach to supporting teams.

Together, these initiatives represent a significant strengthening of our wellbeing framework, particularly in the area of bereavement support. We remain committed to evolving our approach and ensuring that all colleagues feel supported, valued, and cared for especially in times of loss.

People

Ensuring our People Policies are user friendly, easy to understand, fit for purpose, and are fair and consistent has continued to be a priority for the Service's People

Programme. In doing so, we've engaged with Trade Unions, Wider Leadership Team, 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 the new Domestic Abuse Policy and Manager Guide, and the updating of the Dignity at Work Policy, which is aligned with the new Worker Protection Act which came into effect in October 2024, introducing a new legal duty on employers to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace.

This has provided an opportunity to re-affirm our stance that there is no place for sexual harassment of any kind at West Midlands Fire Service. A stand-alone Sexual Harassment policy has been developed and was published in March 2025. The policy focuses on seeing the process through a 'human lens' with support for both victims and those who have been accused and is designed to ensure the information is accessible as possible. It is an important step forward for us as a Service in defining our zero-tolerance stance on sexual harassment and being clear on how we will handle any cases we encounter.

The 'All Hands to the Pumps' study has seen us embark on sector-leading research with the University of Birmingham, 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. With the project completed, the findings and recommendations have been presented to the Senior Leadership Team and the next phase will involve collaborating with the University of Birmingham to share the outcomes wider and begin to address the recommendations.

We have overhauled our approach to personal development reviews, with the launch of a new Appraisal Policy and process in December 2024. An appraisal is the process whereby a member of staff and their line manager discuss their progress and challenges over the previous 12 months and plan for the upcoming 12 months. Together they explore areas to develop further, set goals, discuss progression and create an action plan including milestones and the offer of support where needed. This new approach supports our staff to be the best they can be and achieve their full potential, in line with our Strategic commitments.

Our Priorities

Organisational Priorities

During 2024/25 we developed and launched our Organisational Priorities; priority areas of work that are critical to the successful delivery of our services. These continue to be progressed on an ongoing basis, with priorities closed once actioned, and new priorities

added as business dictates, as we continue to develop new ways of working, and to respond to ever increasing challenges and demands on the Service.

One Team Priority

The strategy for 2024/25 saw us organise our strategic goals into four areas aligned to the way we were organised during that period (with the structure of the Service continuing to evolve throughout to where it is now at the time of writing in 2025/26) and our goals – Community Risk Reduction, People, Enabling Services and Values. However, while these provided a convenient structure, we wanted to better reflect the responsibility of everyone at WMFS to deliver against them and to contribute to our intended outcomes. In June 2024, we adopted a 'One Team' approach, and a new set of aligned promises.



The One Team promise recognises that every member of the Service plays a vital role. It highlights the importance of a culture that unites everyone in the organisation – one that values, nurtures and celebrates each person's contribution to our shared goal of making the West Midlands safer, stronger and healthier.

Our 'We are WMFS' campaign, exemplifies the One Team approach, exploring how our people, supported by our equipment, vehicles and systems, make our communities safer. It's about their expertise. Their dedication. Their compassion. It's also about the difference they make, every day, to people's lives. From our IT staff to our cleaners, our mechanics to our communications team, they all play their part in saving lives, daily, by supporting our colleagues on the front line of our service delivery and enabling them to respond to all emergency incidents assertively, effectively and safely.

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 the spotlight report on Values and Culture in the Fire and Rescue Services in January 2023. It was a report that proved difficult reading for all fire and rescue services. The report made 35 recommendations, 20 of which were applicable to fire and rescue services and were accepted in full by WMFS. Of the 20 recommendations, 19 have been addressed in full, including the requirement for all staff and volunteers to have an appropriate Disclosure Barring Service (DBS) check completed. A plan of action to implement the remaining recommendation is in place HMICFRS will review how well we have implemented all recommendations during our next inspection in 2026.

HMICFRS Standards of Behaviour: 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 selected to take part in this inspection, as representative samples of fire and rescue services across England in terms of size, location, governance structures and performance. Following our participation, the Service received a hot debrief from HMICFRS in January 2024 which was encouraging. Our Statement of Assurance for 2023/24 provided an overview of the key findings all of which WMFS addressed through the implementation of a variety of initiatives including the development and progress of our Inclusion Action Plan which was launched in June 2024.

HMICFRS published the full report on 31 July 2024, a report which we welcome having engaged in the inspection openly and transparently with a view to continuous improvement. We accepted all of the recommendations in full, with a number of areas already being addressed and joined by some new strands of work for the Service to consider.

This has included the provision of guidance for all staff to ensure they understand how to raise a concern and use grievance and whistle-blowing processes, and in doing so, providing clarity on all of our formal processes in relation to anonymous reporting, whistleblowing and grievances.

The report identified 15 recommendations to be addressed by fire and rescue services, and we have completed 10 in full. Detailed action plans are in place and are nearing completion for the five outstanding recommendations. HMICFRS will review how well we have implemented all recommendations during our next inspection in 2026.

HMICFRS third inspection of WMFS

HMICFRS commenced their third regularly scheduled inspection of WMFS in October 2024, with it concluding in January 2025. It was a snapshot in time but, nonetheless, a

valuable opportunity to be independently assessed and to learn. The subsequent report was published in June 2025 and although outside the timeframe of this statement, it is relevant at the time of writing.

We are proud that the inspectorate awarded the Service with an assessment of 'Good' across a number of areas including recognising our staffs continued effective delivery of our core services, and the upholding of our fundamental purpose of keeping our communities safe. This included how we consistently meet our five-minute response standard, providing a fast response to the public. The inspectorate also acknowledged our preparedness to respond to major and multi-agency incidents, and how well we work with other services during emergencies,

HMICFRS acknowledged that the Service continued to:

- Meet key response standards, which the inspectorate praised as fast
- Provide a supportive culture for staff and good welfare provision
- Deliver our core services effectively
- Maintain a good standard of protection work

The inspectorate also identified areas for improvement, which we fully accept, including included workforce planning, financial sustainability, organisational learning and talent management. The inspectorate acknowledged that there were plans already in place to address many of these areas through our organisational priorities, service delivery plans, and corporate governance improvement plan. As a direct example, a new Operational Training and Development Model is now in place, having gone live in April 2025, and has received great feedback from staff.

Further information on the findings and recommendations of the inspectorate can be found within the inspectorate's full report - https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/frs-assessments/west-midlands-2023-2025/

Best Value Inspection

The Governance section of this statement provides an overview of WMFRA's governance improvement journey. A key part of this is the Best Value Inspection, which is underway at the time of writing and is covered in detail within the Governance section of this statement. The Best Value Inspection's focus on governance differentiates this inspection from HMICFRS' report published on 18 June 2025 which focussed on operations (details above).

Internal Operational Assurance

The Chief Fire Officer leads the senior leadership team which oversees the shape and direction of the Service and ensures that it is adhering to our statutory responsibilities.

The senior leadership team oversee the delivery of our strategy, strategic objectives and strategic annual priorities.

Our 2024-2027 Strategy, launched in April 2024, was the beginning of a new approach, building upon and replacing our previous three-year rolling strategy, which was called 'Our Plan' and published annually, with a more explicit strategy document spanning across a three-year period. It is an approach which has been designed to articulate our longer-term vision and to show not just what we aim to achieve but how we deliver it and how measure success. It also provided the opportunity to simplify the format to make the document even more accessible to our staff, communities, and partners.

The 2024-27 Strategy was informed by and reflected our Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) and the views and opinions shared through our public consultation carried out during 2023. The CRMP covering the three-year period of 2024-2027 was published in April 2024, and the content of which is available here.

The Strategy set out more clearly our vision, mission statement and strategic commitments to help the public understand the Service's purpose and future direction:

- We are working with our communities and partners to make them safer and healthier through **prevention** of fires and other emergencies.
- We are working to **protect** life and property to make communities safer and businesses stronger.
- We are delivering an assertive, safe, and effective emergency **response** to fires and other emergencies.
- We are safeguarding our people, planet, and future by delivering a **sustainable** service.
- We are promoting positive **culture and values** to maintain the trust of our communities and ensure the West Midlands Fire Service is a safe and welcoming place for everyone to work.
- We are providing **value for money** by delivering our services efficiently and driving improved productivity in everything we do.

The Strategy saw us organise our strategic goals into four areas aligned to the way we were organised at the time and our goals – Community Risk Reduction, People, Enabling Services, and Values. However, whilst these were a convenient way to arrange our goals, everyone in our service has a responsibility to deliver against them and contribute to our intended outcomes.

Each set of goals are complimented by a range of associated measures, including a number of key performance indicators newly introduced as of April 2024, that expand upon the existing balanced scorecard approach, with the aim of providing an ever broader overview of how the Service is performing, in turn providing a level of assurance for staff, the Fire Authority, partners and our communities.

2024/25 also saw us introduce our Annual Report, which is available live on our website, and not only reflects the hard work, resilience and commitment of our people across the previous 12 months, but provides assurance to our communities, partners, and staff of how we are performing as a Service.

The strategy is available in full on the WMFRA Committee Management Information System.

Corporate Governance Improvement Board

The formation of the Corporate Governance Improvement Board (CGIB) was agreed by the Authority in February 2025, and its members were appointed throughout the February and March, with the first meeting of the board taking place on 25 April 2025. At that meeting, the Board received the final draft of the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny's (CfGS) Review of Authority Governance. The findings of this review has formed the basis for a proposed Governance Improvement Plan. The aim of both the CfGS Review and the CGIBs Improvement Plan is to identify areas for improvement in the Service and Authority's governance, with a view to providing greater assurance to the Authority, key stakeholders and the public that WMFRA and WMFS are effectively governed and able to support the delivery of an effective fire and rescue service.

The CGIB will meet monthly initially. Meetings are held in private, with the work shared with the full Fire Authority on a quarterly basis, and relevant updates on the work of the Board will be shared with staff, stakeholders and the public. The quarterly updates submitted to the full Fire Authority are available via the Committee Management Information System.

The performance of WMFS during 2024/25

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' five-minute response is based on evidence and knowledge of risk to saves lives, homes, and businesses. We have continued to deliver within our defined response times throughout 2024/25, 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 2024/25 our Fire Control handled 58,306 calls, in an average of 78.2 seconds per call. Our firefighters attended 29,391 incidents and they arrived at the most serious in an average of just 4 minutes 49 secs. Increases in both the number of calls received (+5.12%) and the incidents attended (+4.33%) were observed during 2024/25.

People who use their smartphone to call us on 999 can also be asked to send photos or videos of what they can see, through our 999Eye application. 999Eye is well embedded within our call handling procedures, proving consistently to be an invaluable tool for providing officers with greater situational awareness and enhancing decision-making processes. It was used 19,754 times throughout 2024/25 to help operators in our Fire Control ensure that through dynamic mobilising, the most appropriate and proportionate initial response is sent to incidents.

Our Response department is focussed on continuous improvement and meeting the expectations of our communities, which will support and enable incidents to be resolved assertively, effectively, and safely. Working alongside our partners we look to enhance our equipment, specialist skills, and fleet embracing new technology and innovation. Our Response Water Team support the maintenance of skills, equipment, and training across the Service.

Adverse weather conditions and water related flooding incidents are happening on an ever-regular basis across the UK, and we continue to develop our readiness to respond to ‘emerging threats’ involving water. This has resulted in an increase in our specialist water response from 4 to 14 fire stations. We have also enhanced some of equipment that our technical rescue teams use, including the provision of underwater cameras and sonar equipment for subsurface rescues.

2024/25 saw the first part of a three-phase approach to enhancing the capability of our water rescue stations over the coming years, to include (Level 2 Water First Responder) Car in Water training, in addition to the (Level 1 Land-based Rescue) Rescue Tethered Swim capability.

Our third level of water rescue competency is comprised by our Water Rescue Technicians at our three Technical Rescue Units, where staff are trained and maintain competencies for swift water rescue. Members of our technical rescue teams are also trained to operate power rescue craft, advise and command at water incidents, and provide tactical advice in relation to major or wide-spread flood or water related incidents nationally.

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.

We continue 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 not only enabled us to continue delivering 'virtual' Safe and Wells throughout the pandemic but allowed us to adapt our ways of working and how we can deliver Safe and Wells going forward, 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 2024/25, we carried out more than 20,000 face to face Safe & Well visits, and over a 1000 were carried out remotely. Over 50% 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. Each year we provide a variety of fire prevention equipment, including hearing impaired alarms, mailbox protectors, and fire-retardant bedding. During 2024/25, we fitted 14,498 alarms.

When delivering road safety prevention, our firefighters and Road Casualty Reduction Team engaged with more than 61,000 people throughout 2024/25, 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, upskilling our operational personnel to deliver high quality Safe and Strong engagement in the community, and to identify and reduce risk in businesses fulfilling our statutory responsibilities under the Fire Safety Order and in line with our CRMP. The aim of Safe and Strongs is to support and educate businesses to reduce the likelihood of fire. In 2024/25 we carried out 659 Safe and Strong visits providing advice to businesses regarding fire prevention, protecting staff, visitors, buildings and contents.

In 2024/25 we recorded 336 accidental fires in non-domestic properties. We attended 7,642 false alarms caused by fire alarm systems, of which 6206 were in a private dwelling. Overall, the number of false alarms represented a 4.71% increase compared to 2023/24. 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) and reducing the number of commercial fires (accidental fires in non-domestic premises). 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. During 2024/25, the Service received over 1500 concerns, nearly half of which were received from members of the public, where they have identified risks within the community. All fire safety concerns are triaged by the fire safety team within three days, and actioned according to the level of risk, with any premises with a life risk being prioritised.

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 ensure that residents are safe in high rise residential buildings. We now have a dedicated HRRB team, that are focused on ensuring that all HRRB across the WM are safe and that any buildings identified with flammable cladding is remediated, at pace. This is part of our commitment to the Local Remediation

Acceleration Plan as outlined by Central government and devolved to WMCA and stakeholders. 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 Service (HoS) creating an action plan to support the implementation of those recommendations into the Service over the coming months.

In line with legislative duties, WMFS engages as a key partner with the Building Safety Regulator, supporting it to ensure the safe design and construction of higher risk buildings.

How do WMFS do it?

The successful delivery of Our Strategy is enabled through the application of project management principles and a decisions framework. These approaches have flexed to meet the differing demands and challenges faced by the Service as it continues to deliver priorities and objectives. Work remains underway to build upon and continue to improve how we deliver the work of our programmes and projects further, including the development of a clear business planning cycle allowing for greater strategic and financial alignment. This approach to business planning continues to be developed and implemented in the Service.

However, 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 continue to 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. We are mindful that the challenges facing the Service during this period will have impacted upon all of our people, and that is why we have ensured clear communication and engagement with all of our staff throughout, and ensuring a high level of wellbeing and welfare support is available, if required.

We recognise that our people are our greatest asset and a thriving engaged workforce is crucial to our success. This is reflected through our People Programme which forms a core part of the organisation, setting 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

This is exemplified through our organisational priority, 'Ensuring our approach to diversity, equity and inclusion, and mental health provision, is best in class'. It reflects what we want to achieve that we are an organisation where every employee feels valued, respected, and included. A place where individualism is embraced, and where employees can access support tailored to their needs. Key deliverables to achieve this have included undertaking a review of our Occupational Health provision, launching a wellbeing pathway, developing our people policies so that they remain inclusive and progressive, and assessing barriers to being a representative workforce; to understand and address these.

It is a huge honour that the Service has earned national recognition in the Inclusive Top 50 UK Employers List for three consecutive years, being ranked in the top five in the most recent list published in November 2024, and the highest-ranking public service and top emergency service. Whilst we are proud of our progress, we remain committed to continuous improvement, ensuring our workforce better reflects and serves the diverse communities of the West Midlands.

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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 2025/26

The next reporting year, 2025/26, will be the second year of our three-year strategy. This will incorporate a minor refresh to clearly articulate our vision, purpose and areas of focus. This includes the move from a programme approach to a more connected approach, aligned to our Organisational Priorities, particularly our '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 remain confident that as your fire and rescue service, we continue to deliver services of the highest standards, including excellent emergency response, and this has been reflected in the findings of HMICFRS inspection. We will be able to report how we continue to deliver improvements across the Service, how we are building upon and addressing recommendations of HMICFRS, and how we continue to develop 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.

Our governance improvement journey will be in full progress, as we continue to pro-actively engage and work with key stakeholders, supporting the work of the Corporate Governance Improvement Board, and engaging with the Best Value Inspection, remaining committed to openness and transparency throughout. We will be able to report how areas for improvement have been identified, and how these are being addressed, as well as building upon existing examples of good practice.

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