

# Auditor's Annual Report Avon Fire Authority

For the year ended 31 March 2025



Date: 13 February 2026

**PRIVATE & CONFIDENTIAL**

Members of the Audit, Governance and Oversight Committee  
Avon Fire Authority  
Police & Fire Headquarters  
Valley Road  
Portishead  
Bristol  
BS20 8JJ

Dear Sirs and Madams

**Avon Fire Authority – Auditor’s Annual Report 2024/25**

We are pleased to attach our draft Auditor’s Annual Report for the financial year 2024/25. This report summarises our audit conclusions and highlights the key findings arising from our value for money work.

We have initially discussed the contents of our report with management and have incorporated their comments where relevant.

This report is intended to be solely for the information and use of management and those charged with governance of the Authority and should not be shared with anyone beyond the Authority without our prior approval.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the Authority’s management for the co-operation and assistance afforded to us during the course of the audit.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bishop Fleming Audit Limited". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Bishop Fleming Audit Limited**

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# 1. Introduction

Our Auditor's Annual Report (AAR) summarises the work that we completed for Avon Fire Authority (the Authority) for the year ended 31 March 2025.

The Authority is responsible for:

- keeping proper accounts and proper records in relation to the accounts and for maintaining an appropriate system of internal control;
- the preparation of annual accounts for each financial year. Such accounts must present a true and fair view and comply with the requirements of enactments that apply to them; and
- putting in place appropriate arrangements to secure the economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources and to maintain an effective system of internal control that supports the achievement of its policies, aims and objectives whilst safeguarding and securing value for money from the public funds at its disposal.

The scope of our work is set in accordance with the National Audit Office's (NAO) Code of Audit Practice (the Code) and the International Standards on Auditing (ISAs) (UK). Our work is planned to provide a focused and robust audit. We are responsible for and are required to provide an independent opinion as to whether the financial statements:

- give a true and fair view of the financial position of the Authority at the year end and of its expenditure and income for the year then ended;
- have been prepared properly in accordance with the CIPFA/LASAAC Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom 2024/25; and
- have been prepared in accordance with the requirements of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014.

We are also required to report to the Authority by exception the following matters, if:

- the Annual Governance Statement does not comply with "Delivering Good Governance in Local Government: Framework 2016 Edition" published by CIPFA/SOLACE; or
- we issue a report in the public interest under Section 24 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014; or
- we make a written recommendation to the Authority under Section 24 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 in the course of, or at the conclusion of the audit; or
- we make an application to the court for a declaration that an item of account is contrary to law under Section 28 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 in the course of, or at the conclusion of the audit; or
- we issue an advisory notice under Section 29 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 in the course of, or at the conclusion of the audit; or
- we make an application for judicial review under Section 31 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014, in the course of, or at the conclusion of the audit.

In addition, we are also responsible for reviewing the Authority's arrangements in place to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. The Code requires us to report on the Authority's arrangements under three specified reporting criteria:

- Financial sustainability – how the Authority plans and manages its resources to ensure it can continue to deliver its services;
- Governance – how the Authority ensures it makes informed decisions and properly manages its risks; and
- Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness – how the Authority uses information about its costs and performance to improve the way it manages and delivers its services.

We carried out our work in accordance with our Audit Plan which we issued to the Authority in March 2025.

## 2. Executive summary

### Results from the audit of the financial statements

We completed our audit of the financial statements and issued our unmodified audit opinion on 13 February 2026. See section 3 for more details.

We also completed component auditor procedures, in line with the NAO group auditor instructions. We had no matters to report from this work.




### Results on our work on other matters

We completed our review of other matters in line with our issuing of the audit opinion on 13 February 2026. See section 3 for more details.




### Results from our work on VFM arrangements

Under the Code, we are required to consider whether the Authority has put in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources for the year ended 31 March 2025.

Our conclusions are summarised below. See sections 4-8 for more details.

<b>Financial sustainability</b>		<p>We did not identify any significant weaknesses in the Authority's arrangements for financial sustainability.</p> <p>We have identified two recommendations (one new and one unresolved from the prior year), where we consider arrangements in place could be improved. See section 8 for details.</p>
<b>Governance</b>		<p>We identified a significant weakness in the Authority's governance arrangements for the year ended 31 March 2025, in relation to the HMICFRS findings. Following a reinspection after the year end, progress has been identified as being made in relation the action plan and this is further outlined in section 6.</p> <p>In addition to the significant weakness, we have identified one recommendation (which is unresolved from the prior year), where we consider arrangements in place could be improved. See section 8 for details.</p>
<b>Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness</b>		<p>We did not identify any significant weaknesses in the Authority's arrangements for improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness.</p> <p>We have identified one recommendation (which is unresolved from the prior year), where we consider arrangements in place could be improved. See section 8 for details.</p>

#### Key:

	No significant weaknesses in arrangements identified and no recommendations made
	No significant weaknesses in arrangements identified but recommendations made
	Significant weaknesses in arrangements identified and recommendations made

## 3. Audit of the financial statements

### Audit opinion on the financial statements

The scope of our work is set in accordance with the Code and the International Standards on Auditing (ISAs) (UK). As stated in section 1 of this report, we are required to provide an independent opinion as to whether the financial statements:

- give a true and fair view of the financial position of the Authority at the year end and of its expenditure and income for the year then ended;
- have been prepared properly in accordance with the CIPFA/LASAAC Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom 2024/25; and
- have been prepared in accordance with the requirements of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014.

We gave an unqualified opinion on the Authority's financial statements on 13 February 2026.

### Key issues arising from the accounts audit

Our work on the audit of the financial statements is complete. The financial statements produced by management were of a good quality, and only a limited number of recommendations were raised. We have received a good level of support throughout the audit.

### Other matters

As stated in section 1 of this report, we are also required to report to the Authority, by exception, the following matters, if:

- the Annual Governance Statement does not comply with "Delivering Good Governance in Local Government: Framework 2016 Edition" published by CIPFA/SOLACE; or
- we issue a report in the public interest under Section 24 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014; or
- we make a written recommendation to the Authority under Section 24 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 in the course of, or at the conclusion of the audit; or
- we make an application to the court for a declaration that an item of account is contrary to law under Section 28 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 in the course of, or at the conclusion of the audit; or
- we issue an advisory notice under Section 29 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 in the course of, or at the conclusion of the audit; or
- we make an application for judicial review under Section 31 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014, in the course of, or at the conclusion of the audit.

We concluded that there were no matters to bring to the Authority's attention in respect of these matters.

### Audit certificate

At the end of the audit, as auditors, we are required to certify the completion of the audit. The effect of this certificate is to close the audit and marks the point when the auditor's responsibilities in respect of the audit of the period covered by the certificate have been discharged.

We cannot formally conclude the audit and issue an audit certificate for Avon Fire Authority for the year ended 31 March 2025 in accordance with the requirements of Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 and the Code until we have confirmation from the NAO that no additional work (beyond submission of the Assurance Statement) will be required in respect of the Whole of Government Accounts exercise.

More detailed findings can be found in our Audit Completion Report which was reported to the Audit, Governance and Oversight Committee on 5 December 2025.

## 4. Value for Money

Under the Code, we are required to consider whether the Authority has put in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources for the year ended 31 March 2025.

The Code requires us to report our commentary on the Authority's arrangements under three specified reporting criteria:

- Financial sustainability – how the Authority plans and manages its resources to ensure it can continue to deliver its services;
- Governance – how the Authority ensures it makes informed decisions and properly manages its risks; and
- Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness – how the Authority uses information about its costs and performance to improve the way it manages and delivers its services.

The NAO has issued guidance for auditors to report against each of the three specified reporting criteria. The guidance also includes a number of further areas for review within each criterion for the auditor to assess those arrangements.

Our risk assessment identified one risk of significant weakness:

HMICFRS Inspection Reports	
<b>Risk of Significant Weakness</b>  His Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Service (HMICFRS) inspection report identified two accelerated causes of concern, four areas that were graded 'inadequate', and a further five that 'require improvement'.	<b>Work done</b>  To address this risk, we have: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Held discussions with management;</li><li>• Reviewed progress in relation to the HMICFRS action plan;</li><li>• Reviewed Internal Audit reports; and</li><li>• Reviewed minutes of meetings.</li></ul> <b>Conclusion</b>  Our work has identified that, although significant progress has been made (with there no longer being any accelerated causes for concern), there remains a significant weakness in the Authority's governance arrangements in respect of this matter as there are still outstanding recommendations, with causes for concern remaining open for prevention and values and culture.  Further detail can be found in section 6 of this report.

We asked management to complete an evidenced self-assessment of the Authority's arrangements. We then reviewed the evidence provided and carried out follow up work as appropriate to consider whether there were any significant weaknesses in the arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.

Our commentary on the Authority's arrangements in each of these three areas is set out in sections 5, 6 and 7 of this report. Our recommendations for improvement are included in section 8.

## 5. Financial sustainability

We considered how the Authority plans and manages its resources to ensure it can continue to deliver its services, including how it:

- ensures that it identifies all the significant financial pressures that are relevant to its short and medium-term plans and builds these into them;
- plans to bridge its funding gaps and identifies achievable savings;
- plans finances to support the sustainable delivery of services in accordance with strategic and statutory priorities;
- ensures that its financial plan is consistent with other plans such as workforce, capital, investment, and other operational planning which may include working with other local public bodies as part of a wider system; and
- identifies and manages risks to financial resilience, e.g. unplanned changes in demand, including challenge of the assumptions underlying its plans.

### Overview and 2024/25 outturn

The Authority reported a surplus of £131k on the Provision of Services chargeable to the General Fund in its Expenditure and Funding Analysis for 2023/24. This compares to the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) presented prior to 2024/25, with this showing a balanced budget for the year.

### Financial planning and monitoring

The Authority maintains ongoing oversight of its financial planning throughout the year, providing quarterly monitoring reports to Fire Authority meetings. These reports outline financial performance and demonstrate progress against the latest MTFP.

Cash flow forecasts are prepared annually by the Accounting Support Team. Based on our review, we have not identified any potential cash flow issues.

The Capital Programme for 2025–2028 (which builds upon the previous 2024–2027 iteration) outlines planned capital investments aligned with strategic objectives set out in the Service Plan 2024–2028. The Programme details proposed spending of £37.2m over the 3 years, of which £34.3m is to be funded from borrowing. A capital programme and strategy for 2025–2026 was approved at the Fire Authority meeting on 14 February 2025. It is anticipated that additional borrowing will be required from 2025–2026 onwards to support the delivery of the 2025–2028 Capital Programme.

Currently, the Authority does not have a formal Workforce Strategy in place. While succession planning and establishment reporting are monitored, these activities do not sufficiently support the broader financial assumptions within the MTFP. Consequently, we have made a recommendation for improvement, detailed in Section 8 of this report.

### Achieving efficiency savings

The budget monitoring reports submitted to the Policy and Resources Committee assess the need for savings initiatives in relation to the MTFP. Meeting minutes provide evidence of thorough scrutiny of these reports, ensuring that members remain aware of the critical importance of delivering the budget. During the 2024/25 financial year, the Authority was not required to implement specific efficiency savings, as no such requirement was identified within the approved budget.

In February 2025, a financial deficit of was identified in the MTFP for 2025/26. There is an Efficiency and Savings Team which explores savings opportunities (see 'Financial planning section' below).

### Financial planning

The Authority presented its 2025/26 Budget to members initially in February 2025, with a revised version being reported in March, following receipt of the grants letter. A final version was presented at the June meeting, outlining a balanced financial plan for the year. All financial planning was based on provisional budget settlements provided by UK Government departments, which informed the Authority's broader planning assumptions. Assumptions are continually reviewed over the life of the MTFP.

The financial planning assumptions feeding into the 2025/26 budget are in line with our expectations for the sector. These include uncertainty over future funding levels including uncertainty on the value of the Protection Uplift funding. The consideration of these risks is monitored through the reporting to the Policy and Resources Committee throughout the year.

The deficit is currently balanced with unidentified savings. It is noted that the authority has held meeting in order to find a resolution for the unidentified savings. Although there have been additional savings identified for 2025/26, there are a significant amount of unidentified savings (£3.2m in 2026/27, £5m in 2027/28 and £5.5m in 2028/29) for future years. There is therefore a risk to achieving these targets, if management cannot identify and deliver the savings schemes. In addition, any situation would be exacerbated by the risk that forecast funding may not be representative of the final funding settlements received each year and result in larger than expected variances. We have therefore included a recommendation on this.

***Based on the work carried out, we are satisfied that there are no significant weaknesses in the Authority's financial sustainability arrangements. We have made recommendations for areas of improvement at section 8.***

# 6. Governance

We considered how the Authority ensures that it makes informed decisions and properly manages its risks, including how it:

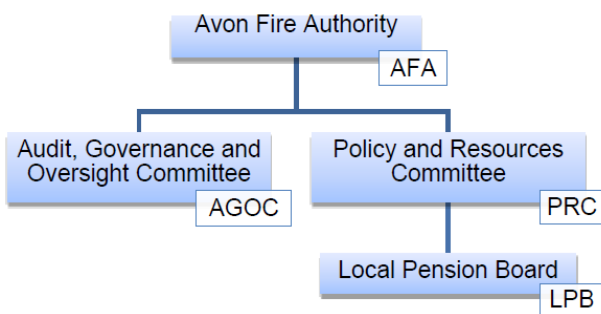
- monitors and assesses risk and how it gains assurance over the effective operation of internal controls, including arrangements to prevent and detect fraud;
- approaches and carries out its annual budget setting process;
- ensures effective processes and systems are in place to ensure budgetary control; to communicate relevant, accurate and timely management information (including non-financial information where appropriate); supports its statutory financial reporting requirements; and ensures corrective action is taken where needed, including in relation to significant partnerships;
- ensures it makes properly informed decisions, supported by appropriate evidence and allowing for challenge and transparency. This includes arrangements for effective challenge from those charged with governance/audit committee; and
- monitors and ensures appropriate standards, such as meeting legislative/regulatory requirements and standards in terms of officer or member behaviour (such as gifts and hospitality or declarations/conflicts of interests), and for example where it procures or commissions services.

## Risk management

The Corporate Risk Management Strategy clearly identifies how the Authority should approach risk identification and the benefits of risk reporting.

The Corporate Risk Register outlines all identified risks faced by the Authority, ranking each by its potential impact and likelihood. Any adjustments to risk scores are documented within the Register, along with an explanation for the change. The Audit, Governance and Oversight Committee (AGOC) reviews the Register twice annually, while the Service Leadership Team continuously monitors all risks, ensuring each is formally reassessed at least once a year. For every risk, the Register presents the initial, current, and target scores, along with an indication of the trend. Each entry includes a detailed rationale for the assigned scores, the existing controls in place to manage the risk, and any planned mitigation actions.

The governance structure of Avon Fire Authority comprises the main Authority and two sub-committees (as shown below), each chaired by a different Authority member.



This arrangement ensures clear and effective communication channels between the sub-committees and the main board, particularly for reporting risks. The sub-committees are the AGOC, and the Policy and Resources Committee. The Terms of Reference for these are included within the Avon Fire Authority Constitution. Each committee paper outlines relevant risks towards the end, enabling these to be considered alongside the broader context when decisions are made.

## His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services Reports:

During 2023, the Avon Fire Authority was subject to several inspection visits from His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) in relation to the Avon Fire & Rescue Service. The Service was assessed on performance in 11 areas, which resulted in HM Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services escalating the Service to the ‘Engage’ stage of enhanced monitoring.

From discussions with officers and review of the reporting from HMICFRS, it is evident that the Authority has acted to introduce Action Plans to address the 'accelerated causes of concern' and 'causes of concern' identified.

Subsequently, there have been several revisits to assess the Authority's progress in relation to the causes of concern identified by the initial inspection. The timeline of the visits is set out in the following table:

Visit Date	Summary of Findings (Extracted from HMICFRS Reporting)
<p>May – July 2023</p> <p><i>Round 3 inspection</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two 'accelerated causes of concern' –               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Risk information process – no effective system to gather and record relevant and up-to-date risk information</li> <li>○ Mobilisation system – the system for recording of information and dispatching of resources to emergency incidents was not reliable</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Two 'causes of concern' –               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Prevention – there is no prevention strategy in place, which should drive day-to-day activities</li> <li>○ Values and culture – evidence was found of behaviours which were not in line with service values.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>- <a href="#">Avon Fire and Rescue Service inspection – accelerated cause of concern - HMICFRS</a></p>
<p>December 2023</p> <p><i>First revisit</i></p>	<p>"We were pleased to see that the service has started to make good progress in relation to both accelerated causes of concern. We recognise that the service has invested time and resources to develop its action plan and has established appropriate and clear governance arrangements, which are being further strengthened following the publication of our full report. Despite good progress being made, there is still more work to do. While the action plan is comprehensive, it is too early to determine how effective the plan will be in addressing the accelerated causes of concern."</p> <p>- <a href="#">Avon Fire and Rescue Service: Causes of concern revisit letter - HMICFRS</a> (January 2024)</p>
<p>March 2024</p> <p><i>Second revisit</i></p>	<p>The mobilisation system (Accelerated cause of concern) remained a concern with technical faults still occurring.</p> <p>The Service had improved their communication with fire control staff and seeks feedback to address any concerns.</p> <p>Welfare support training had yet to be provided to all fire control staff. This was documented as completed on the action plan, but evidence showed that this was not the case.</p> <p>- <a href="#">Avon Fire and Rescue Service: Cause of concern revisit letter - HMICFRS</a> (May 2024)</p>
<p>September 2024</p> <p><i>Third revisit</i></p>	<p>HM Inspectorate found significant improvements in relation to the mobilisation system, which resulted in this accelerated cause of concern being closed.</p> <p>The risk information process for site-specific risks was being worked on. The Service stated that training had been provided to most wholetime firefighters and wider staff. However, the data did not support that this was the case. Further work is required to ensure that the completed actions are effective.</p> <p>Prevention is a key focus of the 2024-2028 Service Plan, including prioritising occupants based on a risk scoring system. The service had improved arrangements however there are still gaps in training for staff and no quality assurance process had been implemented.</p> <p>The culture within the organisation needs to be reviewed to work with all parts of the workforce to build trust and confidence. Staff reported evidence of behaviours which were not in line with the service's values.</p> <p>- <a href="#">Avon Fire and Rescue Service: Causes of concern revisit letter - HMICFRS</a> (October 2024)</p>

Visit Date	Summary of Findings (Extracted from HMICFRS Reporting)
July 2025  <i>Fourth revisit</i>	<p>A review was carried out on the progress against the accelerated cause of concern raised about the service's risk information process and the cause of concern raised about prevention.</p> <p>HM Inspectorate identified significant improvements in relation to the risk information process, which resulted in this accelerated cause of concern being closed. To ensure that temporary risks are added onto the risk information system and managed appropriately, this accelerated cause of concern was closed and the recommendation for temporary risks was moved to an area for improvement.</p> <p>The prevention team have also made good progress with five out of the six recommendations having been addressed. The outstanding recommendation is that the service needs to review whether the prevention department has enough resources and whether wholetime firefighters can offer more capacity to prevention activities. The service should continue to make prevention a priority. As a result, the final recommendation and cause of concern remain open.</p> <p>The cause of concerns about prevention and values and culture (which was not reviewed in this visit) remain open. Progress against the cause of concern about values and culture will be reviewed in the next full inspection commencing 15 December 2025.</p> <p>- <a href="#">Avon Fire and Rescue Service: Causes of concern revisit letter - HMICFRS</a> (September 2025)</p>

A recommendation was raised in the prior year for improvement in relation to reviewing actions implemented and ensuring desired outcomes are achieved. This has been followed up in section 8 of our report.

Since 2023/24, we have made enquiries of management and received further public correspondence from HM Inspectorate to support the progress to date against the risk of significant weakness.

As evidenced in the table above, through the reporting of HMICFRS, the Authority have made progress towards reducing their 'accelerated causes of concern' and 'causes of concern'. However, there are still outstanding recommendations, with causes for concern remaining open for prevention and values and culture. In our opinion, this constitutes a significant weakness in the governance arrangements in place at the Authority, therefore we have raised a recommendation in section 8 of our report.

In the prior year, we raised a further significant weakness, with the recommendation that the Authority should promptly implement the required actions to close the remaining causes of concern and recommendations made by HM Inspectorate to strengthen its arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. Whilst the significant weakness in relation to there being outstanding causes of concern remains relevant, this one regarding the implementation of the action plans been deemed to be resolved. This is because we have identified that the Authority held extraordinary meetings to discuss the outcome of the HMICFRS report and revisits held, and HMICFRS noted that the service 'has continued to invest time and resources to develop the action plan and has established robust monitoring and governance arrangements'.

### Internal control

RSM provides internal audit services to the Avon Fire Authority and attends each meeting of the AGOC to present audit findings. The Committee is responsible for approving the Annual Internal Audit Plan and receives regular progress updates at each meeting.

Our review of internal audit reports, alongside the Committee's meeting minutes and supporting documentation, has not revealed any significant gaps in the assurance provided to the Authority regarding its work programme. There is good evidence of the Authority implementing internal and external audit recommendations. The Annual Internal Audit Opinion for 2024/25 (as presented to the AGOC on 14 March 2025) was that 'The organisation has an adequate and effective framework for risk management, governance and internal control. However, our work has identified further enhancements to the framework of risk management, governance and internal control to ensure that it remains adequate and effective.' Of the total number of 24 agreed actions from work completed in 2024/25, none were listed as 'High Priority'.

In accordance with the CIPFA Position Statement on Audit Committees in Local Authorities and Police (2022), Avon Fire Authority has appointed an Independent Member to its AGOC. This aligns with best practice, which recommends that all local authority audit committees include co-opted independent members.

The Committee plays a vital role in maintaining the effectiveness of internal controls. It fulfils this role appropriately by adhering to its terms of reference and constructively challenging officers on both internal and external audit matters.

### **Budget setting and budgetary control**

Budgets are prepared by the Finance team, with performance from the previous year reviewed in collaboration with budget holders. Final approval is granted at a meeting of the Avon Fire Authority. A substantial portion of the Authority's funding is derived from the Council Tax precept, supplemented by contributions from Central Government.

The budget setting process for 2025/26 considered two separate options in relation to the increase of the Council Tax precept. The Fire Authority approved a £5 increase in the Council Tax Precept for 2025/at the meeting on 14 February 2025, which is in line with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's Local government finance policy statement for the year.

Sufficient evidence has been seen through review of minutes to provide assurance that the budget setting and monitoring processes are reported frequently throughout the year. Analysis of budget variations and explanations were included in the reporting, however there was little detail in relation to service activity or workforce information alongside this. In the prior year, we raised a recommendation that, with regards to budget monitoring reports, the Fire Authority should include (where appropriate) the relevant non-financial information to provide context to decision makers around matters such as service activity and workforce planning. We have not seen that there has been any amendment with regards to reporting on this so are raising the recommendation again that the Authority should aim to improve the level of non-financial reporting alongside budget monitoring which is received by the Policy and Resources Committee.

### **Decision making**

We are satisfied that appropriate arrangements are in place to ensure that all relevant information is provided to decision makers before major decisions are made, and that there are arrangements for challenge of such decisions before they are made.

### **Ensuring appropriate standards**

We have been advised that there were no instances of significant non-compliance during the year, and our review has not identified any evidence to the contrary. The Gifts and Hospitality Register, published quarterly, provides clear and detailed records of any gifts received, along with the reasons for their acceptance.

The Authority has established policies and procedures to uphold appropriate standards. These include the Freedom of Information Policy, which aligns with the Local Government Transparency Code 2015, outlining the data publication requirements for local authorities.

Declarations of interest are included as a standing agenda item at all relevant meetings.

### ***Based on the work carried out, we have identified a significant weakness in the Authority's governance arrangements:***

At the date of reporting, Avon Fire Authority have two open 'Causes for concern' in relation to reports made by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services. These were first raised following inspection visits in mid-2023. There have been several follow-up visits since the initial inspection. The authority has made progress since this visit, closing two "Accelerated causes of concern".

Out of the unresolved causes of concern, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services has reported improvement against the cause of concern regarding prevention. Only one out of the original six recommendation for prevention now remains open.

Progress against the remaining cause of concern around values and cultures has yet to be reviewed by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services. Review of this is planned for early 2026.

We have raised a significant weakness in relation to the outstanding HMICFRS causes of concerns.

### ***We have made recommendations for areas of improvement at section 8.***

## 7. Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness

We considered how the Authority uses information about its costs and performance to improve the way it manages and delivers its services, including:

- how financial and performance information has been used to assess performance to identify areas for improvement;
- how the Authority evaluates the services it provides to assess performance and identify areas for improvement;
- how the Authority ensures it delivers its role within significant partnerships and engages with stakeholders it has identified, in order to assess whether it is meeting its objectives; and
- where the Authority commissions or procures services, how it assesses whether it is realising the expected benefits.

### Assessing performance and evaluating service delivery

The Avon Fire Authority's Service Plan 2024–2028 outlines its strategic priorities, supported by six core objectives against which performance is measured, as detailed below. The plan sets out how the Authority intends to achieve these priorities and objectives.

The Authority has shared with us details of the confidential internal milestones while developing monitoring reports that have been in development since May 2023, for monitoring and measurement of progress against actions and strategic aims in more detail. These include Workshops with Service Leadership Board (SLB), SLT engagement sessions regular updates, evidence of training and reporting to leadership. Resulting Reports are based on Power BI systems, which while not yet the finished article, allow closer scrutiny and visibility of progress. Outputs include action plans, the Improvement Register, and a new style Service Plan that includes a fixed point in time for reporting, rather than rolling dates. This allows more ready monitoring of progress.

The Authority presents its performance against key objectives to the Performance Review and Scrutiny Committee, including a detailed evaluation of progress against indicators aligned with the strategic priorities and objectives outlined in the Service Plan 2024–2028. This report tracks performance trends to identify areas requiring action for improvement. Financial performance against the approved budgets and MTFP is reported to the Policy and Resources Committee during regular meetings, highlighting progress made throughout the year towards achieving a breakeven position.

The Authority takes part in the National Fire Chiefs Council, where national issues relating to Fire are discussed.

### Partnership working

The Authority has a significant number of partnerships and collaborations with other bodies to deliver their services, in line with their statutory duty under the Policing and Crime Act 2017 to collaborate.

The Authority holds a Register of Collaborations and Formal Partnerships, and also a Register of Home Fire Safety Visits Referral Partnerships which monitor their partnership and collaborative working with other services. These are reported annually to the AGOC who review the progress made within the partnerships in line with the established Collaboration Strategy. As per the Collaboration Evaluation Status Report all collaborations had been reviewed by the year-end.

### Commissioning and procuring services

The Avon Fire Authority has a procurement strategy in place which aims to drive social value and sustainable practices in procurement whilst maximising efficiencies and improving value for money. This procurement strategy was implemented in 2019 and was due to be reviewed in 2022. However, this review was delayed, and we raised a recommendation with regards to this in 2023/24. The planned implementation was December 2024. The updated procurement strategy was not approved until after the year-end in July 2025, which was in response to the update in the national procurement policy statement in February 2025. Given the continued delays in the implementation of the strategy, we have included the recommendation as unresolved for 2024/25.

There is no indication that the Avon Fire Authority fails to conduct fair procurement processes for major contracts. Contract managers monitor agreements throughout the year, and the evidence reviewed demonstrates proactive engagement with suppliers to address and mitigate issues, thereby minimising any disruption to service delivery.

*Based on the work carried out, we are satisfied that there are no significant weaknesses in the Authority's arrangements for improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness. We have made a recommendation for areas of improvement at section 8.*

## 8. Recommendations

### KEY:



Recommendations that refer to issues that have resulted in a significant weakness in the Authority's arrangements.



Recommendations that should improve the arrangements in place at the Authority but are not as a result of identifying a significant weakness.

### Current Year Issues

Financial sustainability - Unidentified savings in the MTFP	
<p>We have identified that there is a significant amount of unidentified savings for years 2-4 within the MTFP, including £2.3m in 2026/27, £5m in 2027/28 and £5.5m in 2028/29.</p>	<p><b><u>Recommendation</u></b></p> <p>We recommend that the unidentified savings are resolved urgently.</p> <p><b><u>Management comment</u></b></p> <p>The Service has an Efficiencies &amp; Savings Team in place to explore savings options across the entire Service to assist in balancing the budget. The MTFP has been kept under review, and based on updated assumptions, the Service is currently working to bridge a gap of c£4m, compared to the £5.5m identified in the approved MTFP. A shortlist of options to make savings has been drafted for consideration by the AFA, pending budget outcomes and expected funding.</p>

### Prior Year Issues – Ongoing

Governance – HMICFRS Reporting	
<p><b><u>Prior Year Finding</u></b></p> <p>In December 2021, the Service was inspected by HMICFRS in three areas, all of which were deemed as 'requires improvement'. However, it was determined that the Service had made significant progress and good investments since the previous inspection therefore a significant weakness was not identified in relation to 2021/22 financial year.</p> <p>We note the grading system has changed in 2022/23, however, the Service was assessed by HMICFRS on its performance in 11 areas of which:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Two were assessed as 'adequate'</li> </ul>	<p><b><u>Recommendation</u></b></p> <p>Although the Service is taking significant steps to address the findings, such as creating a detailed action plan and strengthening the Corporate Risk Register to reflect the HMICFRS report findings, it is recommended that the Service continues to review the actions implemented and ensures the desired outcomes are achieved to address the concerns raised.</p> <p><b><u>2022/23 Management comment</u></b></p> <p>The Service was aware of two accelerated causes of concern months before publication of the report (in August 2023) and have already taken significant steps to address those concerns, which were recognised by the Inspectorate during their re-visit to the Service in December 2023. Here is a summary of the further steps taken:</p>

Governance – HMICFRS Reporting	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Five were assessed as 'requires improvement'</li> <li>• Four were assessed as 'inadequate'</li> </ul> <p>This shows that significant improvements are needed to address the inspection findings and there is a significant weakness.</p> <p>The HMICFRS report highlighted fundamental issues in relation to culture and performance and the following accelerated causes of concern were published:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Service doesn't have an effective system to gather and record relevant and up-to-date risk information to help protect firefighters.</li> <li>• The Service's mobilisation system isn't reliable and crashes on some consoles during 999 calls.</li> </ul> <p><b><u>2024/25 Update</u></b></p> <p>The service has taken significant step to close the causes of concern as reported by HMICFRS. The service has made substantial progress, closing the remaining accelerated cause of concern in the year.</p> <p>However, it is still recommended that the service continues to implement the action plans to address the remaining 2 causes of concern. This therefore remains a significant weakness due to the causes of concern left to address.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Service Action Plan to address the recommendations associated with the two accelerated Causes of Concern was submitted and approved by the Policy &amp; Resources Committee meeting on 29 September 2023.</li> <li>• The Chief Fire Officer (CFO) has reviewed oversight mechanisms to ensure that progress with the Service Action Plan is monitored more closely and has set up: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A Service Improvement Board (comprising members of the Service Leadership Board and key external stakeholders) which is chaired by the CFO and meets monthly and</li> <li>• An Internal Improvement Team, which brings together a number of improvement strands, including the HMICFRS Action Plan, alongside other Service transformation and efficiency work.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• An Extraordinary meeting of the Fire Authority was convened on 13 December 2023 to discuss the latest HMICFRS report and to note the work in progress to develop an Action Plan to address the formal recommendations.</li> <li>• The Service has entered the 'Engage' phase with the Inspectorate (to offer the Service support) and the CFO, Fire Authority Chair and Vice Chair have already briefed the HMICFRS' Fire Performance Oversight Group (FPOG) chaired by HM Chief Inspector Andy Cooke in February 2023, at which further progress was reported and recognised.</li> <li>• Following a Governance Review last year, the Policy &amp; Resources Committee Terms of Reference include responsibility for 'priority programmes', including HMICFRS Action Plans and will continue to closely monitor progress with the Round 3 Inspection Plan.</li> <li>• Risks on the Corporate Risk Register (CRR) has been strengthened to deal with risks highlighted by HMICFRS; Members have received bespoke training on risk and a new CRR Framework is due to be introduced.</li> <li>• The Service has also introduced a Continuous Improvement Framework and toolkit for senior managers to access on SharePoint, which reflects best practice, allowing managers to access information quickly on progress against the HMICFRS Action Plan.</li> </ul> <p><b><u>2023/24 Management comment</u></b></p> <p>The Service continues to invest time and resources to deliver improvements and has made significant progress in addressing the two accelerated and two further causes of concern, and the 20 recommendations associated with them.</p> <p>Following the latest HMICFRS revisit (September 2024) one of the accelerated causes of concern and eight of the 20 recommendations have been closed.</p> <p>Summary of further steps taken:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction of an Internal Improvement Board (in addition to the strategic Service Improvement Board). This meets monthly, scrutinising action plan progress, assuring outcomes</li> </ul>

Governance – HMICFRS Reporting	
	<p>are being delivered and supporting action owners where needed.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to attend the Fire Oversight and Performance Group meetings in London as part of the 'Engage' enhanced monitoring of the Service, where progress made is reported and has been recognised.</li> <li>• The Corporate Risk Register has been further enhanced, with a full review taking place on a quarterly basis. There has also been a 'deep dive' review of the HMICFRS risk register entry.</li> <li>• Bi-monthly reporting of progress to the Service Leadership Team for consideration and scrutiny</li> <li>• A report was presented to the Fire Authority meeting on 6 November 2024 regarding the outcome letter (published October 2024) of the third revisit to the Service in September 2024</li> <li>• Additional audits undertaken covering the mobilising system and risk information accelerated causes of concern to provide an additional assurance check on progress.</li> </ul> <p><b><u>2024/25 Management comment</u></b></p> <p>The Service has continued to invest time and resources to address the remaining causes of concern and the recommendations associated with them.</p> <p>Following the latest revisit (July 2025) the Risk Information cause of concern has been closed and increased the number of recommendations closed to 13.</p> <p>Summary of further steps taken:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Continued attendance at the Fire Oversight and Performance Group meeting in London as part of the 'Engage' enhanced monitoring.</li> <li>- Checkpoint meetings with the HM Inspector for AF&amp;RS</li> <li>- Frequency of progress reporting to the Service Leadership Team increased to monthly</li> <li>- Quarterly progress reports on progress to the Policy and Resources Committee</li> <li>- People, Culture and Leadership Strategy 2025-2030 produced along with an associated programme.</li> </ul>

Financial Sustainability - Workforce Planning	
	
<p><b><u>Prior Year Finding</u></b></p> <p>We have assessed the Authority's arrangements in relation to financial planning and concluded that they do not have a Workforce Strategy in place which feeds into their MTFP.</p> <p><b><u>2024/25 Update</u></b></p> <p>Our review in 2024/25 identified that the Authority still does not have a Workforce Strategy in place.</p>	<p><b><u>Recommendation</u></b></p> <p>The Authority should produce a Workforce Strategy covering a sufficient period of time such that it can provide a meaningful basis for calculation of the workforce-related elements of the MTFP.</p> <p><b><u>2023/24 Management comment</u></b></p> <p>Recommendation is noted. A Succession Planning policy is currently in draft, awaiting further development once the People Services structure has been finalised and agreed. This will determine where succession and workforce planning sit within the Service structure including ownership</p>

and oversight. There are a number of processes that dovetail into these strategies which the People Services restructure should support including establishment monitoring, retirement profiling and recruitment cycle planning. However, there remains a challenge with anticipating funding and MTFP on an annual cycle which will inevitably restrict the potential for longer lead-in times with this. The business case for the People Services restructure has not yet been agreed by SLB and it should be noted that this agreement will determine how much of the above can be supported as it will impact on resources and capacity available.

**2024/25 Management comment**

A separate Workforce Planning Strategy is not considered necessary as all relevant aspects are covered across the following:

- Service Plan & CRMP
- People, Culture & Leadership (PCL) Strategy\*
- Succession & Talent Management Policy (now published following a period of consultation)
- Terms of Reference for the new governance and oversight of workforce development, establishment and talent through the Strategic Establishment Board, Tactical Establishment Group and Workforce Development Group

\*The PCL Strategy is a living document and due consideration will be given to whether further aspects of workforce planning can be clarified or specified, but the shift towards improved governance through the various boards and steering groups will create increased focus and collaboration towards clear goals. The PCL strategy outlines the priorities for the Service in the areas of People, Culture and Leadership and these are in line with the NFCC People, Culture and Leadership pillars, including Leadership and Workforce Development, highlighting what success looks like (including workforce plans).

**Governance - Budget Monitoring Reports**



**Prior Year Finding**

On review of the revenue budget monitoring reports presented to the Policy and Resources Committee, we are unable to see that there is integration of relevant non-financial information into the reporting alongside financial information.

**2024/25 Update**

Review of the 2024/25 budget monitoring report identifies a continued lack of incorporation of relevant non-financial information into the reporting.

**Recommendation**

When producing budget reporting, the Fire Authority should include (where appropriate) the relevant non-financial information to provide context to decision makers around matters such as service activity and workforce planning.

**2023/24 Management comment**

We will review our budget monitoring reporting and consider how we can best incorporate non-financial information into that reporting going forwards.

**2024/25 Management comment**

Due to other priorities during the last 12 months, this recommendation has not yet been addressed. Consideration will be given as to how we can include non-financial information into our Policy and Resources Committee papers going forwards.

## Economy, Efficiency and effectiveness - Procurement Strategy Updates



### Prior Year Finding

Our work identified that the Procurement Strategy was due for revision in 2022, however this was delayed and intended for implementation in August 2024. This has now slipped to December 2024.

### 2024/25 Update

The Procurement Strategy was not approved until after year end in July 2025. This was updated in response to the update in the national procurement policy statement in February 2025.

### Recommendation

Although the procurement strategy has been approved, this was after significant delays and continued slippage. Management should ensure that any future updates to all policies and procedures are made in a timely basis.

### 2023/24 Management comment

The new procurement strategy is in draft stage and will be circulated for consultation with stakeholders in December with the intention to bring a finalised version to the January SLT meeting to be approved and then published.

### 2024/25 Management comment

The sign-off of the procurement strategy (due in Jan 24) was put on hold due to the delay of the implementation of the Procurement Act from Oct 24 to Feb 25. Much of the strategy required consideration of the new Procurement Act and the changes within it, to ensure alignment to national and procurement Act objectives. It was deemed appropriate to review the draft strategy following the implementation of the Act rather than issue a strategy that may not have reflected the changes within the Act.

## Prior Year Issues – Resolved

## Governance - Implementation of Action Plans



### Prior Year Finding

Following the most recent visit from HMICFRS in September 2024, they have identified that there are still significant issues and that several recommendations are yet to be addressed.

Our audit work in relation to assessing the arrangements in place at the Authority raises some concern that progress is still required in respect of one 'Accelerated cause of concern' and two 'Causes of concern'.

### 2024/25 Update

We have identified that the Authority held extraordinary meetings to discuss the outcome of the HMICFRS report and revisits held, and HMICFRS noted that the service 'has continued to invest time and resources to develop the action plan and has established robust monitoring and governance arrangements'.



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