



# Annual Governance and Assurance Statement 2024-2025

## Table of Contents

1. Executive Summary .....	3
2. Purpose and Context.....	4
3. Governance.....	6
4. The CIPFA/Solace Governance Framework.....	7
5. Principle A: Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law .....	7
6. Principle B: Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement.....	11
7. Principle C: Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social, and environmental benefits .....	12
8. Principle D: Determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of intended outcomes.....	13
9. Principle E: Developing the entity's capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it .....	14
10. Principle F: Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management.....	16
11. Principle G: Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting, and audit to deliver effective accountability .....	17
12. Operational assurance.....	18
13. Financial assurance .....	25
14. Fire Standards Board.....	28
15. External assurance .....	29
The Head of Internal Audit opinion 2024/25 .....	29
External Audit 2024/25.....	30
His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services .....	31
16. Current Challenges and Planned Improvements.....	33
17. Statement of commitment.....	35
18. Glossary of Terms .....	36

## Appendix

Outcomes of the annual self-assessment against the CIPFA/Solace principles

# 1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 This Statement explains how Avon Fire Authority (AFA) has complied with our Local Code of Corporate Governance and meets the requirements of The Accounts and Audit (England) Regulations 2015, specifically Regulation 6 (1) in respect of the annual review of the effectiveness and preparation and publication of an Annual Governance Statement (AGS).
- 1.2 The financial, governance, and operational arrangements described in this Statement have been in place in the AFA for the year ending 31 March 2025, and up to the date of the approval of the Statement of Accounts.
- 1.3 In accordance with the [Guidance on Statements of Assurance for Fire and Rescue Authorities in England](#), and from completing the review of the Service's financial, governance and operational arrangements, it has been concluded that the Service has had due regard to the requirements of the [Fire and Rescue National Framework for England](#) (2018). This Statement explains how AFA has had regard for the Framework.
- 1.4 The review of internal controls by our internal auditors, RSM UK Risk Assurance Services LLP, resulted in an overall opinion that the Service has an adequate and effective framework for risk management, governance, and internal control. Further enhancements to the framework of risk management, governance and internal control were identified, to ensure that it remains adequate and effective.
- 1.5 It is part of External Audit's role to be satisfied proper arrangements have been made to secure economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in the use of resources (Value for Money – VFM). In their draft report to AGOC in December 2025, our External Auditors noted an ongoing significant weakness in relation to the Service's governance arrangements, first raised in 2022/23. This related to the recommendation that the Service continues to review the actions implemented and ensure the desired outcomes are achieved to address the concerns raised by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS).
- 1.6 The Service recognises the need to address HMICFRS findings. Effective governance arrangements are in place, to ensure we are progressing the recommendations and actions needed to continue our improvement journey. Progress has been recognised by the Inspectorate during their revisits and revisit letters.
- 1.7 In completing the review of the Service's governance and assurance arrangements, no other significant governance issues were identified in addition to those highlighted in the HMICFRS report. The development and publication of this Statement helps us take stock as we move forward and the review of the Authority's assurance arrangements has identified some areas for improvements which are set out in Section 16 and in the action plan as an Appendix.

## 2. Purpose and Context

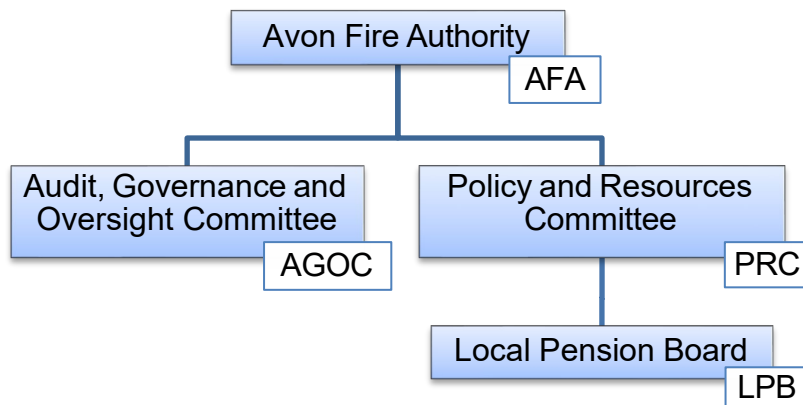
- 2.1 The AFA is responsible for ensuring that it delivers its services in accordance with the legislation, regulations and Government guidance and that proper standards of stewardship, conduct, probity, and professional competence are set and adhered to by all those working for and with the AFA. This will ensure the services provided to our local communities are delivered efficiently, effectively, and economically, and that public money is used wisely, is properly accounted for, and achieves optimum value for money.
- 2.2 Our key responsibilities are contained within:
- Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004
  - Fire and Rescue Services (Emergencies) (England) Order 2007
  - Fire and Rescue National Framework for England 2018
  - Civil Contingencies Act 2004
  - Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005
  - Fire Safety Act 2021
  - Localism Act 2011
  - Accounts and Audit (England) Regulations 2015
  - Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974, and associated regulations
- 2.3 The AFA is committed to continuously improving its services to meet the needs of the public; reviewing and developing what it does and consulting with the public about its activities on a regular basis. In discharging these responsibilities, the AFA is responsible for putting in place proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs. The AFA has adopted a Local Code of Corporate Governance, which is consistent with the principles of the *Delivering Good Governance in Local Government: Framework* (CIPFA/Solace, 2016) – where CIPFA is the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy and Solace is the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers. A copy of our code has been incorporated into our [Governance and Assurance Framework 2024-2028](#).
- 2.4 The AFA has a responsibility to prepare an AGS in support of its Annual Statement of Accounts, in line with the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015. The aim is to provide an accurate representation of the corporate governance arrangements and controls in place that have supported the delivery of organisational objectives during the year. The AGS provides information about where arrangements have been effective and notes where any improvements are required.
- 2.5 Fire and Rescue Services (FRSs) must also publish an annual statement of assurance (ASA) as set out by the Fire and Rescue National Framework. The statement should outline the way in which the Authority and its FRS has had regard to the Framework, the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP), and to any strategic plan (e.g. the [Service Plan](#)) prepared by the Authority for

that period. Each Authority must also provide assurance to their community and to the Government on financial, governance, and operational matters.

- 2.6 The ASA aims to provide an accessible way in which communities, the Government, local authorities, and other parties can make an informed assessment of the AFA's performance. This statement will be used as a source of information on which the Secretary of State's biennial report will be based, under section 25 of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004.
- 2.7 The most efficient way to meet both the National Framework and the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 requirements is through the creation of one report entitled 'Annual Governance and Assurance Statement' (AGAS).
- 2.8 This statement is informed by an annual review of the effectiveness of its governance framework including the system of internal control. The review includes:
- Feedback from managers within the organisation who have responsibility for the development and maintenance of the governance environment.
  - A self-assessment against the CIPFA/Solace principles.
  - A gap analysis against the Internal Governance and Assurance Fire Standard.
  - A self-assessment of compliance against the Fire and Rescue National Framework for England.
  - A review of significant press interest throughout the year.
  - A review of performance against stated objectives.
  - A review of the Corporate Risk Register.
  - Internal Audit Annual Report and Annual Opinion.
  - External Audit Annual Report.
  - HMICFRS Reports.
  - Any other consultant reports taking place within the year.
- 2.9 When determining whether an issue is significant and needs to be included within an AGS, consideration is given if an issue:
- is seriously prejudiced or prevented the achievement of a principal objective.
  - resulted in the need to seek additional funding or required a significant diversion of resources from another part of the AFA's business.
  - had a material impact on the accounts.
  - attracted significant public interest or seriously damaged the AFA's reputation.
  - resulted in formal action being taken by the S112 Officer or the Monitoring Officer.
  - received significant adverse commentary in external inspection reports and which the AFA has yet to address in a timely manner.
  - has been identified by the relevant audit committee – Audit, Governance and Oversight Committee (AGOC).

### 3. Governance

- 3.1 The AFA is responsible for putting in place proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs, which includes a sound system of internal control and effective arrangements for the management of risk. The overarching system of internal control is made up of multiple policies, procedures, and corporate strategies that collectively ensure the key principles of governance are delivered. The arrangements are set out in the Governance and Assurance Framework 2024-2028 and the Corporate Risk Management Strategy 2024-2028.
- 3.2 The governance structure of the AFA and its Committees is depicted below, with the roles and responsibilities set out in the [Constitution](#).



- 3.3 The governance structure within Avon Fire & Rescue Service (AF&RS or the 'Service') is the responsibility of the Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive (CFO/CE). This is discharged through the Service Leadership Board (SLB), which consists of the most senior executive officers of the Service and the Service Leadership Team (SLT), which includes Area Managers, Heads of department, and invited representatives from across the organisation. Full Terms of Reference can be viewed in Appendix 2 and 3 of [Being the best that you can be](#).
- 3.4 The SLB has overall responsibility for the organisation's strategic direction, leadership, decision making, capital and revenue requirements, and risk management. The SLB oversees Service operations, ensuring competent and prudent management and planning, good governance, and suitable control measures to ensure compliance with statutory and regulatory obligations.
- 3.5 The SLT provides day-to-day leadership and management for the Service, overseeing a working environment which supports the effective achievement of our organisational priorities and ensures the Service is a great place to work. The SLT is responsible for the review of detailed reports on specific organisational business which require scrutiny and decision making.

- 3.6 The Statutory Finance Officer (SFO) provides effective strategic management of the AFA Financial strategies and monitors the financial health of the AFA, with statutory duties in relation to the financial governance and stewardship of the AFA.
- 3.7 The Clerk is the Monitoring Officer whose role is to advise on the rule of the law and ensure decision making is legally sound, and for overseeing governance arrangements for the AFA.

## 4. The CIPFA/Solace Governance Framework

- 4.1 The AGAS 2024/25 is aligned to the *Delivering Good Governance in Local Government: Framework*, published by CIPFA/Solace in 2016. This Framework is intended to assist authorities in reviewing its governance arrangements and its approach to risk management, to ensure a sound system of control is in place and that there is clear accountability for decision making.
- 4.2 To achieve good governance, each year the AFA will demonstrate that its governance structures comply with the seven core principles of the CIPFA/Solace Framework. The seven principles (A to G) are considered within the *annual self-assessment against the CIPFA/Solace principles 2024/25*, which can be found as an Appendix. A summary of the outcome of this review is provided below.

## 5. Principle A: Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law.

- 5.1 Avon Fire and Rescue Service (AF&RS) has a *Values, Ethics and Behaviour Framework* which takes account of the national [Core Code of Ethics for Fire and Rescue Services](#), and the five ethical principles of; putting our communities first; integrity; dignity and respect; leadership; equality, diversity and inclusion.



Guided by these standards of behaviour, we support our staff to embrace challenges, recognise achievements, and live out our values, which are:

- Respectful
- Ambitious
- Honest
- Inclusive
- Courageous
- Transparent

- 5.2 The [Being the best that you can be](#) document outlines the Service's vision and commitment to achieving excellence. Leadership is promoted at every level of the organisation with an expectation that everyone – no matter where they work, their rank or their role – has a responsibility for leading themselves in line with our values, to help us be the best we can be. The document sets out what is expected from every member of AF&RS staff. It aims to bring together the guiding principles, frameworks and tools including our *Values, Ethics and Behaviour Framework*, the *Core Code of Ethics*, our *Zero Tolerance Statement*, and the *National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) Leadership Framework*.
- 5.3 The Dignity and Respect Policy outlines that AF&RS promotes a safe, harmonious, and inclusive workplace with a zero-tolerance approach to bullying and harassment. The supporting digital toolkit provides staff with the support, guidance, and procedures needed to deal with unwanted and/or inappropriate behaviour - whether they experience it, witness it, want to support someone affected, need to manage a situation, or have been accused of such behaviour.
- 5.4 An HMICFRS Spotlight Report on [Values and culture in fire and rescue services](#) was published on 30 March 2023 which reported there were allegations by staff of bullying and harassment in every FRS in England. Throughout 2024/25 there have been numerous negative press reports nationally, regarding culture and misogyny within the sector, including within AF&RS. These reports have attracted public interest and had a detrimental impact on the reputation of all FRSs across the UK.
- 5.5 An ongoing priority for the SLB and SLT is the acceleration of culture change in AF&RS; proactively seeking to learn from staff feedback and people's lived experience to continue to move forward positively. In August 2024, the Service commissioned a review of culture within the Control room, which highlighted a number of areas where improvements can be made. A staff led action plan has been developed to address the recommendations. Face to face 'Culture chats' have taken place across the Service to gain more direct staff feedback relating to culture.
- 5.6 The Service is committed to continually improving values and behaviour-based discipline processes. The discipline and grievance policies have been reviewed and are supported by manager toolkits providing clear information regarding associated processes and expectations. The Service have increased usage of external professional investigators for employment cases and provided training for all middle managers. AF&RS will continue the service level agreement with SARI (Stand Against Racism & Inequality) and

Bristol Women's Voice to provide independent professional support for our equalities and community engagement programmes.

- 5.7 A Whistleblowing policy is in place, setting out the actions an employee can take to raise serious issues which are of public interest. It is important employees feel able to raise such matters, without fear of victimisation, discrimination, disadvantage, or reprisal. A confidential reporting service is also in place, providing a confidential way for staff to raise concerns, with the number of cases, themes and outcomes published quarterly on the intranet to provide staff with confidence that inappropriate behaviour is being addressed. A Professional Standards Board has been established to manage discipline cases and instigate external scrutiny and governance.
- 5.8 There is a mandatory requirement for all staff to have a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check, including enhanced checks where required, based on role.
- 5.9 The AFA appoint a qualified solicitor as their Clerk and Monitoring Officer, which is a statutory role set out in section 5 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. The Clerk's role is to advise on the rule of law to ensure decision making is legally sound and to raise any concerns by preparing a report to the AFA. The Clerk will advise if any proposal, decision, or omission by the AFA, or any Committee, has given rise, or is likely to give rise, to a contravention of any enactment, rule of law or code of practice or maladministration. The Clerk is responsible for advising upon and overseeing governance arrangements for the AFA and for ensuring that all meetings are properly organised and convened in accordance with the AFA's Constitution.
- 5.10 The Clerk is responsible for reviewing papers and minutes to ensure they are comprehensive and accurate to enable appropriate and lawful decisions to be made by elected Members. The Clerk also provides legal advice to the AFA and the SLB on key matters and reviews the Constitution, documents, and policies, as required, to ensure that they correctly reflect current legislative requirements and meet the needs of the AFA. The Clerk meets with the SLB monthly, acting as a formal advisor when strategic issues are considered to ensure that any legal issues are identified, and steps are taken to mitigate any legal risks.
- 5.11 The SFO is a member of the SLB, with statutory duties in relation to the financial governance and stewardship of the AFA. The role provides effective strategic management of the AFA financial strategies, including the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP), Reserve Strategy, and the Annual Budget. The SFO monitors and reports on the financial health of the AFA, which includes the oversight of the monthly monitoring and forecasting of budgets and reporting on projected expenditure. The SFO is a qualified accountant and is

supported by the Head of Finance and by the Finance team which includes professionally qualified finance officers.

- 5.12 The Service employ a solicitor specialising in employment law to provide in-house legal advice and support with employment cases. The role of 'General Counsel' is consulted at an early stage by Human Resources (HR) and the SLB, to assist with case management, provide advice short of legal proceedings, and represent the Service in Employment Tribunals. The General Counsel also advises on other areas of law, for example Freedom of Information and Data Protection Act requests, which are often linked to employment cases.
- 5.13 AFA Members are required to adhere to the AFA Constitution which includes the Members' Code of Conduct, aligned to the Local Government Association (LGA) Model Councillor Code of Conduct. The Constitution explains how the AFA operates and how it makes decisions.
- 5.14 The AGOC keep under review the Code of Conduct for Members and ensures that Members receive appropriate training. By way of a Sub-Committee (minimum three Members), the Committee deals with cases referred by the Clerk/Monitoring Officer relating to Members' conduct. Members are required to disclose any interests at all meetings and on the register of interests. There is also a register for declaring gifts and hospitality for Members and staff.
- 5.15 AF&RS is committed to providing a professional, effective and efficient service to the community. Members of the public are encouraged to contact the Service, feedback is an essential tool in ensuring the high standards the public deserve continue to be met. The Concerns and Complaints process is published on the AF&RS website, for concerns relating to AF&RS as a whole, individual members of staff, or specific to a service provided.
- 5.16 At an Extraordinary meeting of the AFA on 25 April 2023, Members considered the findings from an independent governance review and accepted all 12 recommendations. Some recommendations were implemented immediately, and others were to be implemented in a second phase of work. The Clerk to the AFA provided an update to Members at the AFA AGM on 12 June 2024 in a paper entitled [Update on Governance Review and refresh of Constitution](#). Members were invited to approve a new Training and Development Strategy for Members and of the nine remaining 'Phase 2' recommendations to be implemented, five were noted as being 'complete', and four were noted as 'In Progress', with an update to be provided to the next AFA meeting. At a further AFA meeting on 6 November 2024 Members considered a further '*Update on Governance Review and refresh of Constitution including new Member/Officer Protocol*'; Members approved all changes to the Constitution and noted that all remaining recommendations from the governance review had been completed.

## 6. Principle B: Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement.

- 6.1 AF&RS is committed to providing information in an open and transparent way to the public. The Service website provides information regarding strategies, policies, plans, performance, finances, incidents, and the work that we do in the community.
- 6.2 Reports, agendas, and minutes of the AFA and its committees are accessible to the public on a separate AFA website, at the following link: [Meetings, agendas, and minutes - Modern Council \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#). Meetings are recorded and made available on the [AFA's YouTube channel](#).
- 6.3 The AFA ensures suitable consultation takes place with key stakeholders including local communities. Public consultation takes place annually for the draft Budget Strategy and the Service Plan.
- 6.4 The [Service Plan](#) sets out how the AFA intends to deliver services over a four-year period and is widely consulted on during its development. The AFA approves the Communication Strategy for consultation on the plan, which includes an online questionnaire for key stakeholders, during which proposed plans are put forward and feedback is requested. The results of the consultation are reported to Members before the Service Plan is finalised, approved by the AFA, and published.
- 6.5 Service consultation, communication and campaign plans identify key audiences and stakeholders and they set out the intended impact on the community.
- 6.6 The staff intranet ensures access to a wide range of documents, guidance, news and information, with a newly launched version improving accessibility and user experience.
- 6.7 The Staff Engagement Network provides a platform for staff feedback and a new Women and Allies Network has been launched, with further new networks launching in 2025. Staff are also represented through ongoing engagement with unions including the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) through the Negotiation Committee and with Unison and Unite through the Joint Consultative Committee.

## 7. Principle C: Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social, and environmental benefits.

- 7.1 The Service Plan sets out the AFA's vision, priorities, and the outcomes it wants the Service to achieve and includes the activities that the Service needs to undertake to deliver against the plan.
- 7.2 The AFA has a statutory duty to produce a CRMP, which informs and is incorporated into the Service Plan. The CRMP utilises data from Community Risk assessments, risk research and horizon scanning to assess foreseeable challenges and risks facing local communities, and outlines how the Service intends to mitigate these. The Service Plan and CRMP are explained further in Section 12, Operational Assurance.
- 7.3 Subject matter experts assess emerging risks and plan appropriate Prevention, Protection, and Response activities to reduce the potential impact of those risks.
- 7.4 Performance indicators are agreed which are aligned to the Service Plan priorities and reported to the SLT and AGOC Members regularly.
- 7.5 A rolling four-year MTFP is produced annually. The supporting narrative report includes information on key concerns and risks considered as well as budget assumptions and justifications. The Annual Statement of Accounts reflect the actuals for the year, and the narrative report reflects how this has varied from budgets and previous years with key explanations as required.
- 7.6 The assumptions made in the MTFP – particularly around inflation, pay awards, and future government grants – while based on the best information available are unknown and therefore subject to change. The long-term impact of future funding is unknown, however the MTFP will continue to link the Service Plan's vision and objectives, ensuring value for money is achieved within a balanced and sustainable budget. The Statutory Finance Officer will ensure that any variation to the assumptions made in the MTFP is identified as early as possible and reported to Members as part of revenue and capital monitoring reports presented to the Policy and Resources Committee.
- 7.7 The [Environmental Strategy](#) sets out the Service's commitment and approach to protecting the environment and being more climate resilient. The strategy outlines how AF&RS will protect the environment, manage our impacts, and address the climate crisis, with the ambitious goal to be Net Zero Carbon by 2030. The Service is committed to embedding environmental best practice, by making climate-responsible decisions, and by responding to our communities' concerns. The AFA's environmental impact is monitored by Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) on energy and water use, business travel, and carbon emissions.

7.8 Combined Scoping Impact Assessments (IAs) provide an initial assessment of impacts for Data Protection, the Environment, People, Safeguarding, Estates, ICT, Finance and Procurement. Staff must complete these when embarking on projects, policy changes, collaborations, events, and writing business cases. A more detailed assessment is carried out where significant impacts are identified.

## 8. Principle D: Determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of intended outcomes.

8.1 The AFA has robust decision making mechanisms. The [Constitution](#) sets out a decision making framework which ensures that all decisions are supported by relevant information, including financial, legal and other appropriate professional advice, that available options are considered and that internal and external stakeholders are consulted. Decisions are formally recorded and published subject to confidentiality requirements.

8.2 The [Internal Governance and Assurance Fire Standard](#) focuses on ensuring that FRSs have internal governance structures and planning processes which enable senior leaders to maintain comprehensive oversight of internal activities, assuring them that the Service is operating effectively. A gap analysis of this Fire Standard confirms that the Service is broadly aligned, however, ensuring that the Service meet the desired outcomes, will be an ongoing piece of work throughout 2025/26.

8.3 Strategies in place for [Prevention](#), Protection and [Response](#) outline the activities necessary to achieve our desired outcomes.

8.4 Progress against planned activity in the Service Plan – and associated detailed action plan – is monitored and reported to the SLT, with an annual summary report to AFA.

8.5 During 2024/25, the Service Improvement team supported delivery of the HMICFRS action plans, the remaining work of the Transformation Programme, the Efficiency and Savings project, and the recommendations included in the HMICFRS Spotlight Report. The Programme Management Office (PMO), also included in this team, ensure effective governance and assurance throughout this programme of work.

8.6 Progress against the HMICFRS Inspection Action Plan is monitored and regularly reported to the Service Improvement Board (SIB), Internal Improvement Board (IIB), and the PRC.

- 8.7 The Continuous Improvement Framework and Toolkit provides a structure for planning, managing, and governing Service improvements, with guidance, tools and templates and a SharePoint Improvement Register, to assist with tracking and monitoring.
- 8.8 Business cases help decision makers in the Service understand the value, costs, risks, and benefits of a proposed initiative. A revised process for business cases was trialled between November 2024 and March 2025 and will be evaluated prior to fully embedding the revised process..
- 8.9 KPIs are aligned to outcomes the AFA has set to achieve in the Service Plan. These are regularly presented in a Performance Report to AGOC and the Annual Performance Report which details the activity and performance of the Service. If the circumstances in which the Service operates changes, activity can be adapted accordingly. Decisions affecting service delivery are delegated to officers to ensure they are able to react to changing circumstances quickly.
- 8.10 The Corporate Risk Register (CRR) identifies significant corporate risks which could prevent AF&RS from achieving its strategic priorities and functions. Monitoring of the CRR is explained in Section 10 (Principle F).
- 8.11 There is legislation which places a statutory duty on Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) to collaborate. AF&RS recognises the value of working collaboratively, whether that's with colleagues across the Service, or with external organisations. The Service embraces collaboration as a key enabler to achieving its mission to improve public safety through prevention, protection, response, and resilience. Collaboration also helps us maintain an excellent service which is effective, efficient, and value for money.
- 8.12 The Service's Collaboration Strategy outlines our approach to collaboration, areas of focus, and gives examples of our collaboration partners. A Collaboration Framework and online toolkit provide guidance, tools and good practice in relation to planning, monitoring, evaluating, and closing collaborations; including the capture of intended benefits during the planning phase which are reviewed during the evaluation phase.

## 9. Principle E: Developing the entity's capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it.

- 9.1 The Service needs appropriate structures and leadership, as well as people with the right skills, appropriate qualifications, and mindset to operate efficiently and effectively and to achieve intended outcomes.
- 9.2 All Corporate Staff in the Service have a job description, and uniformed Officers have role maps. Each appointment is made using fair selection

practices that measure candidates against criteria for each post. This ensures selection of the right people with the right skills, qualifications, and experience. Staff are further supported by policies, guidance notes, training and bespoke online learning and courses, to ensure they have the support they need to carry out their roles.

- 9.3 Workforce planning has a crucial role in ensuring the Service has the capacity to meet its obligations and fulfil its aims and objectives. Regular Operational Resource meetings are held, to highlight any demands on operational capacity, and enable the Service to address foreseeable issues. The Transfer, Appointments and Promotions Board (TAPB) ensure that information regarding the establishment is used to look ahead in our succession planning. The group ensures that a holistic approach is taken, and considerations are given to organisational and individual development requirements.
- 9.4 The [Leading the Service Fire Standard](#) clearly articulates the expectations on those who lead within Services, particularly their behaviours, ethics, and the activities required to lead well. Ensuring that the Service meet the desired outcomes within this Fire Standard will be an ongoing piece of work throughout 2025/26.
- 9.5 The [People Service Strategy](#) sets out the strategic direction for the Diversity, Inclusion, Cohesion and Equality (DICE), Organisational Development, Wellbeing and HR teams. This strategy will be updated in 2025.
- 9.6 Leadership development and our Development Pathways ensure that colleagues have all the support they need on their career journeys and that opportunities are offered fairly. The Service offers a range of apprenticeships to improve skills and bring new talent into the organisation.
- 9.7 Annual Personal Development Reviews (PDRs) for all staff provide an opportunity to set personal objectives and ensure that all staff are able to have discussions about their aspirations, performance, and future development. Organisational objectives can also be filtered down to individuals during these reviews. Improvements have been made to the process during 2024 and the provision of training and resources has resulted in greater engagement with the process and improved completion rates and quality. Additionally, 360-feedback is available to managers to support their development.
- 9.8 Health and Wellbeing is of utmost importance to the Service, and we look to promote a positive working environment supported by the People Services Department, Dignity and Respect Toolkit and provision of supplementary healthcare. A wellbeing gap analysis has taken place, with identified improvements to be implemented during 2025/26.

9.9 The DICE team – in collaboration with HR – delivered line management training workshops throughout 2024/25. Training content covers DICE principles, NFCC Core Code of Ethics, relevant legislation, and interactive exercises covering inappropriate behaviour, banter, and the [\*Being the best you can be\*](#) leadership framework. A blend of uniformed and corporate staff attended to encourage the sharing of experiences and best practice across varied areas of the Service.

## 10. Principle F: Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management.

10.1 The AGOC provides independent assurance to the AFA on matters relating to audit, governance and risk management, Annual Statement of Accounts, Service performance and the conduct of Members.

10.2 The PRC monitors and oversees priority programmes such as the HMICFRS Action Plan, the Transformation programme (which closed in March 2025), programmes focused on cultural development, and all large-scale estates construction or redevelopment schemes.

10.3 The PRC monitors the Authority's procurement forward plan and approves business cases for proposed procurements in line with the Contract Procedure Rules.

10.4 The Service approach to risk is explained in its Corporate Risk Management Strategy 2024-2028 which is reviewed every four years in line with the Service Plan planning cycle, to ensure it remains effective.

10.5 The CRR is a live document which accurately reflects the nature and level of our current risks, the planned interventions to mitigate risks, and progress against these mitigations. The SLT reviews corporate risks monthly, supporting an approach that prioritises risk awareness at AF&RS, rather than risk avoidance. They scrutinise updates from risk owners, assess evaluation of likelihood and impact levels, and monitor actions to control / mitigate risk events. Interdependency considerations are made to ensure understanding and ownership of corporate risk is applied consistently across the Service.

10.6 The Corporate Risk Management Strategy has guided improvement milestones, as part of advancement of the Service's Risk Management Framework and risk culture. Corporate risk appetite and tolerance levels have been embedded into the CRR, using 'riskometers' to hold each risk event to account based on the alignment to relevant risk categories. In January 2025, the SLB reviewed and amended our risk appetite and tolerance levels, as part

of their commitment to regular review – at least annually – and to ensure risk appetite is effectively guiding strategic risk management and decision making.

- 10.7 A review of the corporate risk descriptors used in the CRR has ensured that risk events, causes, and consequences are suitably described, evaluated, and monitored. Risk owners have added key risk indicators to the CRR, which has strengthened the assurance around risk evaluation (of current likelihood and impact levels) and risk scoring. In 2025/26, key control indicators will be added as metrics to help monitor that control measures (mitigations) are being implemented as intended and are effective in supporting the management of risk events.
- 10.8 The [Avon and Somerset Community Risk Register](#) provides information on emergencies that could happen within the Service area, together with an assessment of how likely they are to happen and the impacts if they do. The information contained within the Community Risk Register is used to inform the AF&RS Community Risk Register and the Strategic Assessment of Risk.
- 10.9 Business Continuity arrangements are in place for critical services, to ensure they can continue to operate in an emergency.
- 10.10 AGOC assess the performance of the Service against agreed measures and organisational targets and responds to areas of underperformance - reporting and making recommendations where necessary to the AFA. The KPIs in the Corporate Performance Scorecard are aligned to the six commitments in the Service Plan 2024-2028. The suitability of the metrics and targets is reviewed annually and progress against these is reported quarterly to the SLT and AGOC. Monthly performance and benchmarking data are also produced and provided to managers responsible for local targets and performance. The [Annual Performance Report](#) is published to detail the Service's performance over the previous year to the public.
- 10.11 Data is managed in accordance with the law. The key information management and security policies in place are: The [Data Management Policy](#), [Freedom of Information Policy](#), and policies to ensure suitable security is in place for the Service's information technology.
- 10.12 Strong financial management arrangements are in place, explained in Section 13 'Financial Assurance'.

## 11. Principle G: Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting, and audit to deliver effective accountability.

- 11.1 Accountability is about ensuring that those making decisions and delivering services are answerable for them.

- 11.2 Internal Audit services are provided by RSM UK Risk Assurance Services LLP and reported to AGOC. Regulation 5 of the Accounts and Audit regulations 2015 states that the 'Authority must undertake an effective internal audit to evaluate the effectiveness of its risk management, control, and governance processes, taking into account public sector internal auditing standards or guidance'.
- 11.3 External Audit services are provided by Bishop Fleming. External Audit provides an opinion on the financial statements of the Authority, as well as providing assurance that value for money has been delivered.
- 11.4 HMICFRS independently assesses the efficiency and effectiveness of FRSs. AF&RS was last subject to a full inspection by HMICFRS during 2023/24, further details are set out below in section 15.7 onwards. The Service is working at pace to address the Causes of Concern raised with enhanced governance, scrutiny, and oversight arrangements, including from the central Fire Performance Oversight Group.
- 11.5 Transparency information is published [on our website](#) in accordance with the Information Commissioner's publication model and we respond to information requests in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act (2000). Published information on our website includes expenditure over £500, procurement information, our organisational chart, senior salaries, the pay multiple, trade union facility time, and our premises. A [Pay Policy Statement](#) and [Gender and Ethnicity Pay Gap Report](#) are published annually to ensure the AFA is transparent about the way staff are remunerated.
- 11.6 Supporting the transparency agenda, data from the Service is provided annually to the Home Office including incident data, workforce data, prevention and protection statistics, fire safety audits, and injuries to firefighters data.

## 12. Operational assurance

- 12.1 The AFA has overall control over the strategic direction, establishment, budget and functions of AF&RS, including the acquisition, disposal and alterations of premises and appliances. The CFO is responsible for the day-to-day management of the organisation and is accountable to the AFA for its efficient operation.
- 12.2 The response to the fire reform white paper was published in December 2023. The Home Office have confirmed that they will not be taking forward a mandatory transfer of Fire and Rescue Authority functions to Police and Crime Commissioner (PCCs) or mayors. They will encourage PCCs and mayors who

want to take on fire governance functions, where the areas are coterminous, to step forward, in order to enable the Home Office to assess readiness and support change. AF&RS is not coterminous with Avon and Somerset Police, however, the AFA has previously approved applications from previous incumbents of that role, to sit on the AFA. A new Avon and Somerset PCC was elected in May 2024 and has not applied to be a voting Member of AFA.

- 12.3 AF&RS has a policy which governs how it handles re-engagement/re-employment which is in line with guidance in the National Framework. The AFA's terms of reference includes establishing a selection panel which, with advice from suitably qualified professionals, oversees the selection process for the CFO/CE, SFO and Monitoring Officer. In addition, the AFA would establish a panel to be engaged in selection processes for Assistant Chief Fire Officers and the Director of Corporate Services, who are consulted in advance of the CFO making an appointment decision.
- 12.4 A key area of focus during 2024/25 has been to continue to improve the quality of the Site-Specific Risk Information (SSRI) available to our operational crews. We proactively identify and visit sites which pose an operational risk, to build familiarity and capture information on the hazards that crews may face. Firefighter safety is key, and by doing this well, we reduce risk to staff and to our community, through being more effective on the incident ground. We risk categorise each site and plan how best to respond tactically via initial actions and longer term, and we share these plans with relevant partners, such as neighbouring FRSs.
- 12.5 The Service continues to embed the new process, refining the product with a focus on firefighter safety and usability. We have invested significantly to allow crews to access the information across the fireground with full mobility, via demountable units, Officers devices, and new 'Incident Support Vehicle' which allows for these documents to be shown on large repeater screens in an enclosed space. The SSRI team has been nominated for 'Innovator of the Year' at the Global Search & Rescue Excellence Awards 2025.
- 12.6 We have a duty to identify and assess all foreseeable fire and rescue related risks through our community risk management planning process. Our Service Plan, which incorporates our CRMP, is developed through insight and data analysis which is used to understand our Service area and local communities.
- 12.7 The Service identifies hazards, challenges, and opportunities through several areas as part of our annual planning cycle:
  - Baseline data provides information regarding the operational demand on the Service and our effectiveness and efficiency in dealing with demand placed upon the Service. Using our data and modelling tools we can visualise where the greatest risks are within our Service area ensuring that risk and demand are matched in the most effective way.

- Our ongoing strategic assessment of risk considers an overall composite risk profile including:
  - National risks – including those taken from the *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, the National Risk Register, climate change and terrorism; and
  - Local risks – including those within the Avon and Somerset Community Risk Register as well as those arising from flooding, new housing developments, local transport infrastructure, commercial and industrial developments, social unrest and civil disturbances, and population growth.
- Horizon scanning and stakeholder engagement, including with senior leaders and subject leads across the Service, is a continuous process to identify and understand potential threats to how the Service operates, and any new or emerging opportunities or risks that may affect our communities.
- Subject matter experts undertake risk assessments and plan appropriate prevention, protection, and response activities to reduce the potential impact of those risks. Risks are regularly reviewed, incorporating findings from baseline data, strategic assessment, National Operational Guidance, operational learning outcomes, Risk Modelling, and Workload modelling.
- While the analysis of baseline data and risk information is a continuous process, to assess all foreseeable fire and rescue-related risks, the last formal documentation of this information took place in 2021 through a Baseline Report and Strategic Assessment. AF&RS should therefore produce up to date documentation in 2025/26, as part of the annual planning process, to ensure and evidence that the Service is best matching its resource to risk.

12.8 We are active members of the Avon and Somerset Local Resilience Forum (LRF) and utilise information in its Community Risk Register as part of our risk analysis. The Avon and Somerset LRF coordinate a shared understanding of risk within our community and a joined-up approach to addressing the risk.

12.9 The Service Plan 2024-2028 incorporating our CRMP sets out our strategic priorities and how we intend to deliver services over that period, effectively manage our risk, and continuously improving our ways of working. As a Service we focus our activities on making our communities safer and making our Service stronger. In order to achieve this, we have six commitments which are: Prevention, Protection, Response, Resilience, Improving our Service, and Investing in our Staff. Our strategic priorities are devised utilising community risk findings and horizon scanning which are consulted with the SLT and approved by the SLB and AFA.

12.10 The AFA ensures suitable engagement and consultation activity takes place with communities and key stakeholders. Public consultation takes place

annually for the draft Revenue Budget and, if necessary, on any significant changes to the Service Plan. This is supported by a communication plan that identifies stakeholders and how best to communicate the intended impact on the community.

- 12.11 To ensure there is suitable regard for the Service Plan, the SLT receives regular updates to review and scrutinise progress towards achieving our strategic priorities. In addition, the AFA receives an annual update on progress along with any proposed changes to the Service Plan resulting from the community risk management planning process.
- 12.12 The Policing and Crime Act 2017 introduced a statutory duty on all three emergency services (Fire, Ambulance and Police) to collaborate with a view to improving efficiency and effectiveness for all parties; with local discretion in how the duty is implemented to benefit local community needs and risks.
- 12.13 The Service's Collaboration Strategy outlines our approach to collaboration and key areas of focus, providing examples of our collaboration partners. Collaboration is also an overarching theme in our Service Plan and underpinning strategies.
- 12.14 We currently have regional collaboration agreements signed by our 'blue light' partners such as missing persons services, and are in the process of reviewing arrangements for collapse behind closed doors and other requests for assistance. We also continue to engage with the Emergency Services Network (ESN) development programme. ESN is being delivered by the Emergency Services Communications Programme (ESMCP) in the Home Office and will replace the current Airwave service used by the emergency services in Great Britain (England, Wales and Scotland). The ESN will build secure and resilient mission-critical communications between the emergency services and other first responders.
- 12.15 The Service's Prevention team has a register of partners who help us reach and support the most vulnerable people in our communities through home fire safety visit (HFSV) referral mechanisms. We continue to develop prevention activities in line with local and national risk and where appropriate work with partners to support prevention delivery.
- 12.16 The Service has safeguarding procedures in place to protect and support local communities. This includes a clear policy, procedures, and training on how to identify and raise concerns of a safeguarding nature. We work closely with the relevant Local Safeguarding Boards, partnerships and other relevant agencies to ensure the best outcomes for our communities.
- 12.17 The Service has made provision for promoting fire safety, including fire prevention and protection in both domestic and non-domestic properties. The

AFA allocated a non-pay budget of £377,704 for its prevention, protection and fire investigation activities during 2024/25. The Service uses the NFCC Person Centred Framework to ensure it targets its prevention activity at the those most vulnerable in our communities. This is done through HFSVs and targeted interventions.

- 12.18 Our Business Fire Safety risk-based inspection programme (RBIP) is designed to help the Service meet our statutory duty to enforce fire safety legislation and to reduce the risk of fire causing death, serious injury and property-related losses in the community.
- 12.19 In addition to our RBIP, we also have a Fire Safety Enforcement Policy that supports the commercial/business community on technical and legislative fire safety matters within:
- Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005
  - The Fire Safety Act 2021
  - The Building Safety Act 2022
  - The Regulators Code
  - The Enforcement Management Model
- 12.20 The policy outlines our commitment to firm but fair enforcement of the Fire Safety Order and uses the principle of proportionality in applying the law and securing compliance.
- 12.21 Following the publication of the Grenfell Inquiry [Phase 2 Report](#) in September 2024, the government committed to setting out measures to increase the pace of remediation. On 2 December 2024, the government published its plan for increasing the pace of remediation for buildings in England with unsafe cladding.
- 12.22 The West of England Combined Authority (WECA) has the responsibility to deliver this plan locally. The Service is working with the WECA administration and local authority partners to develop its plan and implement a regional inspection team to support the pace of remediation and secure significant long-term funding to support the work.
- 12.23 We have mutual aid arrangements with our neighbouring FRAs under Sections 13 and 16 of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, and in line with Fire and Rescue Service Circular 29/2006.
- 12.24 Additionally, AF&RS is a signatory to the National Mutual Aid Protocol for Serious Incidents, as detailed in Fire and Rescue Service Circular 42/2006. Our mobilisation policy sets out a series of protocols for the mobilisation of staff and appliances including, but not limited to, recall to duty, pre-determined attendance, and mobilisation of specialist appliances and assets.

- 12.25 Business continuity arrangements, align to the Business Continuity Institute Good Practice Guidelines, to ensure critical services can continue to operate in an emergency. This includes a backup and recovery strategy for dealing with a disaster and Service-wide plans for specific disruptions such as severe weather, fuel shortage and high absence. Our business continuity plans identify the critical activities we must maintain during a disruption, referred to as the Critical 5, and include communications, operational response and fire safety, resource planning, fleet and information technology. Station and department level plans are scheduled for review on a rolling cycle or post-incident. There is a Business Continuity Steering Group, which meet quarterly to maintain oversight of business continuity arrangements and we actively participate in the NFCC Business Continuity Group. Internal Audit found that business continuity documentation required more frequent review and increased scrutiny by the Business Continuity Steering Group. All recommended actions are due to be completed by June 2025.
- 12.26 To prepare for major incidents, under the Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Programme (JESIP), the Service works closely with other local, bordering, and national emergency services to prepare for major incidents such as a terrorist attack, widespread flooding, or pandemic to provide an effective multi-agency response. The Service carries out joint training with South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust (SWASFT) and Avon and Somerset Police for Marauding Terrorist Attacks (MTA) operatives, which helps to support and strengthen assurance of our MTA capabilities.
- 12.27 The Service also hosts specialist assets as part of the country's national resilience (NR) arrangements to respond to major incidents and natural disasters. These include high volume pumping (HVP), urban search and rescue (USAR), hazard detection, identification, and monitoring (H-DIM) and the Mass Decontamination Unit (MDU) capability.
- 12.28 The Service works with the NFCC's National Resilience Assurance Team (NRAT), which carries out regular checks and reviews of each capability, including site visits and national exercises. AF&RS fully engage in the NR assurance process, attend associated national working groups and are in regular contact with the leads for the NR assets we hold. There are procedures in place for maintenance and testing of all our national resilience assets provided, in line with the long-term capability management arrangements.
- 12.29 The Service's maintenance of skills and training (MOST) system provides a view of skills and capabilities, including those required by the NRAT, and we maintain a local skills matrix for our NR capabilities, aiding any gap analysis. The NR web application contains a personnel register, which highlights any

gaps in qualifications. There were no permanent skills gaps on the personnel register in 2024/25, temporary gaps are addressed on an ongoing basis.

- 12.30 Our 'Escalation to 'Critical' national threat' guidance document outlines to all AF&RS staff the procedures to follow during periods when the UK national terrorism threat level is raised to 'Critical'. To ensure the Service can respond to the threat of terrorism both locally and nationally, it provides a response as per the Joint Operating Principles for the Emergency Services. Response capabilities comprise a dedicated National Interagency Liaison Officer cadre, level 2 specialist MTA responders and level 1 non-specialist responders.
- 12.31 MTA response and capability within the fire sector is currently a consideration nationally. In November 2023, the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) issued a circular withdrawing agreement to attend or train for MTA incidents. This has an impact regionally and locally, with FBU members having the option of following the union's guidance. Negotiations continue locally and nationally to agree a position in the fire sector providing a response to MTA.
- 12.32 The Service has a statutory duty and a legal requirement under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 to provide an emergency Fire and Rescue provision to our communities. We have a cadre of Auxiliary Reserve Firefighters who provide resilience in responding to emergencies during potential Industrial Action.
- 12.33 Resilience for the on-call provision is assisted by a team of on-call Support Officers who provide daytime fire cover across the Service area where the need is greatest. Additionally, a number of our wholetime firefighters hold a secondary contract to provide on-call cover at our on-call fire stations.
- 12.34 Health, safety and welfare is considered throughout all of our core activities, and we look to promote a positive and safe working environment supported by our [Health, Safety and Welfare Policy](#). The Service's Health and Fitness Policy contains the fitness principles from Annex C of the Fire and Rescue National Framework for England including fitness assessment and support. The Authority employs a Fitness and Physical Wellbeing Advisor and maintains a network of Station Fitness Advisors to advise staff on firefighter fitness. The Service also has an occupational health contract which provides additional advice and support to help manage firefighter fitness and awarded a two-year contract in May 2025, to provide Supplementary Health Care for the Service.
- 12.35 The Service has established processes to provide support to operational personnel who experience difficulties in meeting the required fitness standards. This consists of multidisciplinary approach with various departments (including HR, Occupational Health, Fitness and Wellbeing) and management working together with the individual to ensure they have the right

support and action plan in place, to help them meet the required standards. In exceptional cases, when alternative options have been exhausted, the Authority would enact the ill health retirement process (in accordance with the relevant pension regulations) or a health capability process.

- 12.36 To promote the sharing of information between key stakeholders on health and safety issues relating to FRS operations, training, and other related activities we consider:
- Statutory advice or updates in relation to health and safety legislation.
  - Any relevant findings from Internal Audit, Joint Organisational Learning and National Operational Learning;
  - Consultation with key stakeholders such as the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), National Operational Guidance and the NFCC; and
  - Data and information (including the publication of our annual Performance Report).
- 12.37 In January 2024, the Service commissioned an external Health and Safety consultant to evaluate our position with regards to Health and Safety management and compliance. The report was received in February 2024 and highlighted no significant concerns. All recommended action points have been adopted and implemented by the Health, Safety and Welfare (HSW) team. A revised and updated health and safety management system aligned to [HSG65](#) is now embedded, and will support the team to effectively manage health and safety workstreams and compliance throughout the organisation.

## 13. Financial assurance

- 13.1 Robust budget management arrangements are in place and financial performance is regularly reported to the SLT and the SLB, as well as being reported and reviewed by PRC and the AFA.
- 13.2 The stewardship of public money is a fundamental responsibility for both Members and staff. The AFA is committed to making sure that the opportunity for fraud and corruption is reduced to the lowest possible risk. Where there is the possibility that fraud, bribery, and corruption have occurred, we will deal with the issue in a firm and controlled manner as set out in the Anti-fraud and Anti-corruption Strategy and Response Plan.
- 13.3 The AFA takes part in the National Fraud Initiative which proactively conducts fraud detection work through a bi-annual exercise that matches electronic data within and between public and private sector bodies to prevent and detect fraud.
- 13.4 Financial services are provided by Bristol City Council (BCC) under a Financial Services agreement. BCC reported their intention to withdraw

payroll services from their provision at the end of the contract term. A procurement process has been completed to appoint a new provider, allowing sufficient time to transition to the new provider in early 2025/26. Other services are expected to remain with BCC as part of a renewed financial services contract.

- 13.5 A number of key financial plans are regularly produced, approved by the AFA, and published in the Finance library on the [AFA website](#), including:
- **The Capital Strategy and Programme**, which outlines AFA's approach to capital investment ensuring it is in line with its Service Plan objectives.
  - **The Annual Revenue Budget**, presented to the AFA prior to 1 March each year, this paper proposes a level of Council Tax Precept for the following financial year, as well as presenting an annual budget for approval, to satisfy the legislative requirement to set a balanced budget in advance of each financial year.
  - **The Productivity, Efficiencies and Savings (PES) Strategy**, approved by the PRC on 16 April 2025, defines the purpose and strategic direction for delivering PES across AF&RS, upholding our statutory obligation of Best Value.
  - **The Reserves Strategy**, presented in accordance with the Fire and Rescue National Framework, the strategy outlines the AFA's approach to reserve management for longer-term financial planning and considers the adequacy and relevance of the reserves currently held.
  - A four-year **Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP)** is produced annually. The supporting narrative report includes information on key concerns and risks considered as well as budget assumptions and justifications. The plan links the AFA's long-term objectives and its financial capacity.
  - **The Annual Statement of Accounts** reflect the actuals for the year and is published alongside the Narrative Report which provides information on the AFA's main objectives, strategies and principal risks as well as providing commentary on how the Authority has used its resources to achieve its desired outcomes. It provides an analysis of the Authority's performance with clear linkages between the information presented in the Narrative Report and the Annual Statement of Accounts.
- 13.6 Internal Audit arrangements are in place to review the effectiveness of internal controls through annual 'key financial control' reviews, in 2024/25 this focused on asset management. A partial assurance rating was given, with agreed actions to update the Asset Management Policy, clarify responsibilities for determining useful economic life of assets and improve the physical verification of assets. The internal control environment is further assessed as part of the annual External Audit, which is explained further in Section 15 'External Assurance'.
- 13.7 Due to a national backlog of audit opinions for local government bodies, the Government set statutory backstop dates, up to the year 2027/28. The aim is

to clear the backlog of unaudited accounts to enable the local audit system to recover. Delays to the publication of audited accounts increases the risk of governance or financial issues being identified too late and hinders accountability.

- 13.8 The SFO oversees compliance with statutory and regulatory financial requirements, including the AFA's Annual Statement of Accounts. Since the last AGS was produced, two sets of accounts have been approved by AGOC, both in advance of the backstop dates, clearing the backlog of external audit opinions. The Annual Statement of Accounts 2022/23 was presented in December 2024 and the Annual Statement of Accounts for 2023/24 was presented at an extraordinary meeting in February 2024. Both Annual Statements of Accounts and Narrative Reports are published on the [website](#).
- 13.9 The draft Annual Statement of Accounts 2024/25 will be presented to AGOC in June 2025. It is anticipated that the 2024/25 accounts will be signed off prior to the backstop date of 27 February 2026.
- 13.10 The AFA follows a detailed close-down procedure to produce the Annual Statement of Accounts, in conjunction with BCC under the terms of a financial services contract. The latest accounting requirements are considered and included, where appropriate.
- 13.11 The External Audit process commences following a period of public inspection of the draft Annual Statement of Accounts. In preparation for the external audit regular review meetings are held with the SFO, Head of Finance, Financial Accountant and the External Auditors to assist at the planning stage of the audit. This helps ensure the Auditors are updated on significant events or changes during the financial year, and that the audit fieldwork is tailored accordingly, resulting in a more efficient end-to-end external audit process.
- 13.12 The assumptions made in the MTFP, particularly around inflation, pay awards, and local and central government grants and funding (based on the best information available at the time) are subject to potential change. A one-year funding settlement leaves uncertainty and unknowns around the remaining term of the MTFP. The maximum available council tax precept has been confirmed for the 2025/26 financial year however this increase has been largely offset by a reduction in a number of Central Government grants. For the 2025/26 financial year, the budget has been approved with a significant deficit. Predicted efficiency savings aiming to achieve around £500k have already been identified to help balance the budget and further savings have been identified within the non-pay budget. The Service is legally required to set a balanced budget each year, and further updates will be taken to the AFA in due course to ensure this requirement is met.

- 13.13 AFA has established reserves to cover the risk of a variation to the key assumptions in the MTFP, and these reserves allow AFA time to identify efficiencies to deliver the required permanent savings over the longer term. The SFO will continue to ensure that any variation to the assumptions made in the MTFP is identified as early as possible and reported to Members.
- 13.14 The Firefighter Pension Administrator – West Yorkshire Pension Fund (WYPF) – have reported a potential breach to the Pension Regulator about the delayed production of the Annual Benefits Statements / Remedial Service Statements. They are expecting to produce these by 30 June 2025. No further breaches have been reported, but an ongoing assessment is made against other statutory deadlines.
- 13.15 The production of the statements has been delayed because WYPF's administration system has needed significant reprogramming to comply with the legislative changes. Unfortunately, these changes and upgrades supplied by their software provider have not all worked as expected and have required substantial testing and fixing. Although the 2024 statement has been delayed, WYPF are confident that all future statements will be sent on time, as the changes will future-proof production.
- 13.16 During 2024/25, there has also been some inconsistencies identified through scrutiny of the data provided by BCC, relating to payroll pension contributions from some pension scheme members. The issue is being investigated, it has been formally lodged with BCC for review and response and a resolution is ongoing.
- 13.17 This is potentially a significant issue with financial implications for government funds (as any shortfall in historic pension contributions will have been provided to the Service by a 'top-up' grant). The extent of the issue is being assessed and specialist legal advice sought. The SFO is maintaining oversight of this, along with the CFO/CE, supported by the Clerk, Finance and HR teams.

## 14. Fire Standards Board

- 14.1 The NFCC [Fire Standards Board](#) oversees the identification, organisation, development, and maintenance of professional standards for FRSs in England. It is responsible for approving Fire Standards and the approach to their development.
- 14.2 There are 19 Fire Standards spanning all areas of the Service, so it is important that suitable governance arrangements are put in place to make sure all Fire Standards are being achieved, ensuring local policies and procedures reflect these standards. AF&RS is working with FRSs within the

region and the NFCC to share best practice and identify the best arrangements to ensure the Service has a cohesive and joined-up approach to meeting all Fire Standards.

- 14.3 The Fire Standards Board have acknowledged the link between HMICFRS 'Characteristics of Good' and Fire Standards, stating that *'The Inspectorate does not audit the Standards, but in inspecting and reporting on the performance of the different Fire and Rescue Services will reference the Fire Standards, as appropriate.'* ... *'The Inspectorate has stated that services working to achieve the Standards are more likely to see improved inspection outcomes and we welcome this being increasingly reflected in inspection findings.'*
- 14.4 AF&RS has systems, tools and processes in place to analyse alignment to the desired outcomes and criteria within the standards. During 2024/25, the Service, supported by the NFCC Fire Standards implementation team, undertook a cross-mapping exercise looking at the Areas for Improvement identified in the HMICFRS Round 3 inspection report and how they relate to the standards. By generating themes of improvement work, the Service can work more efficiently in meeting both Fire Standards criteria and outcomes, and HMICFRS actions and recommendations.
- 14.5 In 2025/26 the Service will complete the gap analysis for each standard, progress the outcome of the cross-mapping exercise with HMICFRS Areas for Improvement, and put in place mechanisms for governance and reporting.

## 15. External assurance

### The Head of Internal Audit opinion 2024/25

- 15.1 The Head of Internal Audit has formed the opinion that based on the areas reviewed during the 12 months ending 31 March 2025, the Service has an adequate and effective framework for risk management, governance, and internal control. Internal Audit also stated, 'our work has identified further enhancements to the framework of risk management, governance and internal control to ensure that it remains adequate and effective'.
- 15.2 The Annual Internal Audit Report stated that consideration should be given to those areas provided with partial assurance. A partial assurance rating was given in the Asset Management Audit Report, with six management actions for improvement. Five actions have been completed at the time of writing, improving controls for this area significantly. The Business Continuity Audit Report also gave a partial assurance rating, identifying six management actions. Work to complete these actions is well underway, with all actions planned to be completed by June 2025.

- 15.3 Completion of Internal Audit actions are monitored by management through an internal action tracker and oversight is provided by the SLT and AGOC. The Internal Auditors review progress throughout the year to verify that recommendations and management actions are being implemented and supported by appropriate evidence. The progress position is reflected in the Internal Auditors' annual report and opinion, including the number of actions fully implemented and actions in progress towards their forthcoming completion dates.

#### External Audit 2024/25

- 15.4 The internal control environment is further assessed as part of the annual external audit, which reports on the AFA's financial statements, including the AGS, providing an opinion on the accounts and on the arrangements in place for securing economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in the use of resources (the value for money conclusion).
- 15.5 Our External Auditors, Bishop Fleming, anticipate issuing an unmodified opinion based on the work undertaken to date on the financial statements for the 12 months ending 31 March 2025.
- 15.6 It is also part of External Audit's role to be satisfied that proper arrangements have been made to secure economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in the use of resources (Value for Money – VFM). In their draft report to AGOC in December 2025, our External Auditors resolved a prior year significant weakness in relation to the implementation of HMICFRS action plans. The report noted “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’.”
- 15.7 The prior auditors significant finding from 2022/23 was reported to be ‘ongoing’. This related to the recommendation that the Service continues to review the actions implemented and ensure the desired outcomes are achieved to address the concerns raised by HMICFRS. The report stated that “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”.

## His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services

15.8 HMICFRS independently assess the efficiency and effectiveness of AF&RS and how we look after our people. In November 2023, HMICFRS published its findings into AF&RS, following their Round 3 inspection. The inspection measures the Service against 11 areas, with each one being given a graded judgement. The 2023/25 HMICFRS report is available on the [HMICFRS website](#).

15.9 The inspection identified two accelerated causes of concern:

- The Service doesn't have an effective system to gather and record relevant and up-to-date risk information to help protect firefighters, the public, and property during an emergency.
- The Service's mobilisation system, which records information and dispatches resources to emergency incidents, isn't reliable and crashes during 999 calls. This unnecessarily delays the mobilisation of resources, and results in the public receiving a slower response to emergencies.

15.10 HMICFRS also identified two further causes of concern, one relating to promoting the right values and culture, and the other around preventing fires and other risks. As a result, the Service entered enhanced monitoring known as 'Engage'. As part of the monitoring process, the CFO/CE reports back on Service improvements to the Fire Performance and Oversight Group, made up of representatives from HMICFRS, the Home Office, Local Government Association, and the National Fire Chiefs Council.

15.11 The judgements for all 11 areas are summarised here:

Outstanding	Good	Adequate	Requires improvement	Inadequate
		Protecting the public through fire regulation	Making best use of resources	Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies
		Responding to major and multi-agency incidents	Making the FRS affordable now and in the future	Preventing fires and other risks
			Getting the right people with the right skills	Responding to fires and other emergencies
			Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity	Promoting the right values and culture
			Managing performance and developing leaders	

- 15.12 Governance arrangements help to ensure we are progressing the recommendations and actions needed for our improvement journey. The SIB, with internal and external representatives, provides strategic oversight of the causes of concern. An IIB was set up in October 2024, to ensure that continuous improvement across the Service is also delivered within the agreed expectations, and where applicable, appropriate scrutiny is applied.
- 15.13 The IIB meetings continue to evolve in format and frequency as it learns how to add most value, in line with its terms of reference (ToR). Minor amendments to the ToR have been made on two occasions. Responsible Managers now submit Close Out reports where they deem the action(s) for a Recommendation or Area for Improvement to be complete. A decision is then made by the board as to whether there is sufficient evidence that the action has been completed, and that the desired outcome has been achieved and will be sustained. Where this is not the case, the Responsible Manager is asked to take further appropriate action.
- 15.14 To provide additional assurance in our governance arrangements relating the HMICFRS causes of concern, our internal auditors carried out a review in June 2024. The report gave a reasonable assurance rating with three management actions agreed and completed, strengthening the arrangements further.
- 15.15 HMICFRS has carried out four revisits. In September 2024, progress against all four causes of concern was reviewed. HMICFRS published a revisit letter on 24 October 2024, recognising the progress made by the Service, following their third revisit to the Service since their initial inspection. The letter announced that HMICFRS had closed the accelerated cause of concern relating to the Service's mobilising system and the three associated recommendations. The letter stated: 'We found significant improvements have been made to the mobilisation system to make sure it is reliable and stable'.
- 15.16 While the second accelerated cause of concern, and the two further causes of concerns remained open, HMICFRS closed five of the 17 remaining recommendations relating to them. Of these, two were closed under 'Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies' and three under 'Preventing fires and other risks'.
- 15.17 HMICFRS is satisfied with the Service's current progress but recognise there is still more to do.
- 15.18 The most recent revisit took place in July 2025, during which progress against the 'Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies' accelerated cause of concern and the 'Preventing fires and other risks' cause of concern was reviewed. The letter can be read here - [Avon Fire FRS revisit letter - September 2025](#). Five further recommendations have been closed along with

the accelerated cause of concern in 'Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies'. The one remaining associated recommendation has been moved to an area for improvement. One 'Preventing fires and other risks' recommendation remains open, along with this cause of concern. Progress on the 'Promoting the right values and culture' cause of concern will be reviewed at the next full inspection, which commences on 15 December 2025.

- 15.19 The Service is working hard to deliver improvements which resolve the issues highlighted by HMICFRS. The current status of actions relating to the recommendations in the Service's HMICFRS Inspection Action Plan is published on our [website](#).
- 15.20 In March 2023, HMICFRS released their [Values and culture in the fire and rescue services](#) spotlight report. The report focused on the values and culture of all FRSs in England and draws on the evidence collected through their inspections, which have been taking place since 2018. Recommendations in the report intended to assist all FRSs to improve values, culture, fairness and diversity.
- 15.21 The spotlight report contains 35 recommendations, of which 20 were for individual FRSs to complete, with completion deadlines set by HMICFRS. Significant progress has been made with all except one of the 20 identified actions now complete.
- 15.22 Between October 2023 and January 2024 HMICFRS carried out an inspection of the handling of misconduct in FRSs in England. The report can be found on the [HMICFRS website](#). An action plan to address the 17 recommendations is in place, with the majority of the recommendations either fully or partially completed ahead of the deadlines set by HMICFRS.
- 15.23 The Service has published progress relating to each of the actions from the HMICFRS Spotlight report and the Standards of Behaviour: The Handling of Misconduct in FRS report recommendations on the [website](#).
- 15.24 HMICFRS launched a new Portal in January 2025 and services are now required to provide quarterly updates on progress against recommendations and areas for improvement identified in inspections, spotlight and other thematic reports.

## 16. Current Challenges and Planned Improvements

- 16.1 Financial sustainability continues to be an area of focus for AF&RS. A continuing one-year funding settlement leaves uncertainty around the remaining term of the MTFP, with deficits identified. A team is in place to identify efficiencies and savings necessary to ensure we maintain a balanced

budget and continue to provide value for money. This work will include identifying opportunities for streamlining processes and optimising the use of our resources, without compromising the quality of our services or the safety of our staff and communities.

16.2 Nationally, cultural transformation remains a priority in the fire sector. Lasting change requires continued focus, leadership, and collaboration to ensure that processes, policies and initiatives are embedded.

16.3 The Service Plan for 2024-2028 sets out how we focus our activities on making our communities safer and making our Service stronger. In order to achieve this, we have six commitments which are: Prevention, Protection, Response, Resilience, Improving our Service, and Investing in our Staff.

**16.4 Planned improvements for 2025/26:**

- We are committed to delivering the objectives set out in our Service Plan and the improvements identified by HMICFRS. We will ensure that a robust action plan and suitable governance arrangements remain in place to address any areas of improvement identified.
- We will complete the gap analysis for each Fire Standard, progress the outcome of the cross-mapping exercise with HMICFRS Areas for Improvement, and put in place mechanisms for governance and reporting.
- We will increase assurance mechanisms relating to pension contributions.
- We will formalise our baseline data and strategic assessment of risk into a single report, to make this information more readily available across the Service, for planning purposes.
- We will review the Service Planning process to identify improvements that can be made throughout the planning cycle, to assist the organisation in achieving its strategic objectives.
- We will increase monitoring and oversight of projects and programmes through the temporary Portfolio directorate, supporting project delivery within the agreed expectations.
- We will develop a long-term People Services Strategy, setting out the strategic direction for the DICE, Organisational Development, Wellbeing and HR teams.
- We will increase staff consultation and stakeholder engagement with the launch of the LGBTQ+ Network and Black and Minority Ethnicity Network.
- We will continue to enhance our use of data to inform decision making, through dashboard development and digitisation. In particular, the 'People Dashboard' will allow more informed decisions to be made regarding the health and wellbeing of our staff.
- We will continue to deliver the objectives set out in the ICT Strategy 2025-26, including a review of ICT governance policies and which will be updated as required.

## 17. Statement of commitment

- 17.1 We have been advised of the result of the 2024/25 review of the effectiveness of the governance and internal control framework, and of the plans for improvement of the systems in place.
- 17.2 We propose over the coming year to take steps to address the matters set out in Section 16 and progress the action plan in the Appendix, to enhance further the Service's governance and internal control arrangements. We will monitor their implementation over the next year and as part of our next annual review of effectiveness.
- 17.3 As Chief Fire Officer of Avon Fire & Rescue Service and Chair of the Avon Fire Authority, we are satisfied that during 2024/25 our business has been conducted in accordance with proper standards and law, and that public money was properly accounted for and used economically, efficiently, and effectively. Additionally, we are satisfied that the AFA has done everything within its power to comply with the requirements of the Fire and Rescue National Framework for England 2018 and the expectations set out in the AFA's community risk management plans.
- 17.4 This Annual Governance and Assurance Statement was approved by AGOC on 05 December 2025 and has been signed by the Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive, the Chair of Avon Fire Authority and both Statutory Officers.



Signed: \_\_\_\_\_  
Chair of Avon Fire Authority: Councillor Paul Goggin

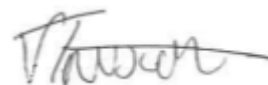


\_\_\_\_\_  
Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive: Matt Cook

Date: 13.2.2026



Signed: \_\_\_\_\_  
Clerk (Monitoring Officer): Zoë Coombs



\_\_\_\_\_  
Statutory Finance Officer (S112 Officer): Verity Truscott

Date: 13.2.2026

## 18. Glossary of Terms

<b>AF&amp;RS</b>	Avon Fire and Rescue Service	<b>LPB</b>	Local Pension Board
<b>AFA</b>	Avon Fire Authority	<b>LRF</b>	Local Resilience Forum
<b>AGOC</b>	Audit, Governance and Oversight Committee	<b>MDU</b>	Mass Decontamination Unit
<b>AGS</b>	Annual Governance Statement	<b>MOST</b>	Maintenance of Skills and Training
<b>ASA</b>	Annual Statement of Assurance	<b>MTA</b>	Marauding Terrorist Attack
<b>BCC</b>	Bristol City Council	<b>MTFP</b>	Medium-Term Financial Plan
<b>CFO / CE</b>	Chief Fire Officer / Chief Executive	<b>NFCC</b>	National Fire Chiefs Council
<b>CIPFA</b>	Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy	<b>NR</b>	National Resilience
<b>CRMP</b>	Community Risk Management Plan	<b>NRAT</b>	National Resilience Assurance Team
<b>CRR</b>	Corporate Risk Register	<b>PCC</b>	Police and Crime Commissioner
<b>DBS</b>	Disclosure and Barring Service	<b>PDR</b>	Personal Development Review
<b>DICE</b>	Diversity, Inclusion, Cohesion, Equality	<b>PES</b>	Productivity, Efficiencies and Savings
<b>ESN</b>	Emergency Services Network	<b>PMO</b>	Programme Management Office
<b>FBU</b>	Fire Brigade Union	<b>PRC</b>	Policy and Resources Committee
<b>FoI</b>	Freedom of Information	<b>RA</b>	Risk Assessment
<b>FRS</b>	Fire and Rescue Service	<b>RBIP</b>	Risk Based Inspection Plan
<b>H-DIM</b>	Hazard Identification and Monitoring	<b>SARI</b>	Stand Against Racism and Inequality
<b>HFSV</b>	Home Fire Safety Visit	<b>SFO</b>	Statutory Finance Officer
<b>HMICFRS</b>	His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services	<b>SIB</b>	Service Improvement Board
<b>HR</b>	Human Resources	<b>SLB</b>	Service Leadership Board
<b>HSE</b>	Health and Safety Executive	<b>SLT</b>	Service Leadership Team
<b>HSW</b>	Health, Safety, and Welfare	<b>SOLACE</b>	Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers
<b>H&amp;S</b>	Health and Safety	<b>SSRI</b>	Site-Specific Risk Information
<b>HVP</b>	High Volume Pump	<b>SWASFT</b>	South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust
<b>IA</b>	Impact Assessment	<b>TAPB</b>	Transfers, Appointments and Promotions Board
<b>ICT</b>	Information and Communications Technology	<b>ToR</b>	Terms of Reference
<b>IIB</b>	Internal Improvement Board	<b>USAR</b>	Urban Search and Rescue
<b>JCC</b>	Joint Consultative Committee	<b>VFM</b>	Value for Money
<b>JESIP</b>	Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Programme	<b>WECA</b>	West of England Combined Authority
<b>KPI</b>	Key Performance Indicator	<b>WYPF</b>	West Yorkshire Pension Fund