



Inspection of the
Scottish Fire
and Rescue Service

North

North
Service Delivery Area

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About this inspection

1. This is the third report in a series of Service Delivery Area (SDA) Inspections of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) carried out by His Majesty's Fire Service Inspectorate in Scotland (HMFSI). This report focuses on the North SDA (NSDA).
2. Since the SFRS was established in 2013, HMFSI had undertaken inspection of service delivery at a Local Authority (LA) level. From 2023, inspection of local service delivery has been carried out across the SFRS's SDAs, of which there are three: North; West; and East. The management of each SDA is overseen by a Deputy Assistant Chief Officer (DACO).
3. A number of the LA areas within the NSDA have previously been the subject of a local area inspection by HMFSI, namely, Angus, Highland, Moray, Dundee City, Western Isles and Aberdeen City. In this SDA inspection, we have revisited these areas, along with those LA areas not previously visited, namely, Aberdeenshire, Perth and Kinross, the Orkney Islands and the Shetland Islands.
4. The format for reporting our cyclical inspection activity has also changed. Our findings and recommendations contained in this report are based on our inspection of service delivery at a Local Senior Officer (LSO) level and are aggregated at an SDA level to inform our judgements/grading, however, we still take cognisance of LA area activity. We have adopted a sampling approach in conducting this inspection, as such, we cannot, with



- complete certainty, identify all potential areas for improvement or areas of good practice. Instead, we intend that this should be a proportionate inspection that provides an overview of the NSDA.
5. Building on the process for the East and West SDA reports, we undertook a short, anonymised survey of all SFRS staff based within the NSDA. We are grateful to all those who took time to complete our questionnaire as it has helped to inform and reinforce our findings. There was a total of 292 responses to our survey which equates to a response rate of 10% of the Full Time Equivalent (FTE) posts in the NSDA. For comparison, the West SDA survey achieved a 24% return, while the East SDA achieved 23%. While the return rates for this survey are significantly different to the other SDAs, the rate remains at a level that we consider to be valid.
6. This report focuses on the four key themes of Prevention and Protection; Response; Partnership; and People. In exploring these themes, we interviewed SFRS Operational Staff, Management Teams, Functional Staff and Support Staff as well as partners from Local Authorities, Police and the Third Sector.
7. Our fieldwork took place between April 2024 and January 2025. Due to a named storm event, the Inspection team scheduled to visit the Western Isles in October 2024 was unable to reach that location. During the fieldwork period there were a number of significant events or issues that impacted our analysis and fieldwork. In particular:
- HMFSI published a report ‘Inspection of the SFRS West Service Delivery Area’ in July 2024.
 - The SFRS launched a public consultation, ‘Shaping our Future Service: Your Say’ to gather the views of members of the Scottish public about what they want from their Fire Service in the future. This consultation is now closed after receiving 6,400 responses. The Service is expected to publish its findings in due course.
 - The SFRS confirmed that appliances removals, including from Perth and Dundee Kingsway East in the NSDA, would remain in place. These temporary arrangements will remain in place until the ongoing SFRS Service Delivery Review consultation is complete and its outcomes are put in place.
8. In making our assessment of how effective the SFRS is in the NSDA, we use the following gradings:

	Opportunity for improvement	where we find important failings of policy, practice or performance which require improvement.
	Satisfactory	where we find limited shortcomings in the area being considered.
	Good	where we find important strengths in performance.
	Outstanding	where we find performance which significantly exceeds Good.

9. The awarding of the gradings is subjectively derived using the Inspectors’ professional judgement, skills and knowledge, and based on analysis, evidence, survey and observation as detailed in Appendix B.

HMFSI NSDA Rating Matrix



Prevention and Protection

How effective is the Service in the North SDA at keeping people safe? We consider this to be **satisfactory**.



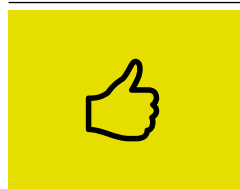
Understanding fire and other risks

The newest iteration of Local Fire and Rescue Plans has been delayed, and while we accept that station plans have been developed, knowledge of these was not as widespread as the SDA might have hoped. We found a good understanding of the risks across the North SDA down to local station level. There is some evidence of response arrangements being considered and adapted to meet changes in risk, but this requires some additional consideration for developing risk, particularly within the renewable energy sector. Operational Intelligence (OI) is accessed via the Service-issued demountable tablet to a greater degree than was evident when using the previous system.



Preventing fire and other risks

A wide range of prevention activity is undertaken by staff across the SDA, much of it aligning with Community Planning Partnership (CPP) and Local Outcome Improvement Plans (LOIP) that have a degree of input from the Service. Many added value outcomes are achieved for the community through this work, but no clear evaluation of the outputs or outcomes is being undertaken. There was not a consistent level of involvement in community safety engagement work by On Call fire station personnel across the SDA. There are a number of instances, following Home Fire Safety Visits (HFSV) being conducted by non-station personnel, of potentially safety critical information not being passed to fire station operational personnel.



Protecting the public through fire regulation

Local Enforcement Delivery Plan (LEDP) outcomes are being achieved, with a risk based approach being successfully applied to guide the work of audit and fire safety enforcement officers. Recent staff turnover has been addressed, and new entrants are working towards competence in their roles across the SDA. Pressure from dealing with the volume of Short Term Let (STL) licencing applications and the ongoing issues with the functionality of the Prevention and Protection Enforcement Database (PPED) are both a drag on the capacity of the enforcement team.



Opportunity for improvement



Satisfactory



Good



Outstanding

HMFSI NSDA Rating Matrix



Response

How effective is the Service in the North SDA at responding to incidents when they do occur? We consider that the Service's response is **satisfactory**.



Preparing to respond to fires and other emergencies

The Service has assessed local risk and developed response plans accordingly. It has an exercise regime to test these plans in conjunction with partners and has processes in place to amend plans as required. The achievement of the Target Operating Model (TOM) for On Call Retained Duty (RDS) personnel is a significant challenge for the North SDA. There is clear evidence of a number of initiatives and approaches in use across the SDA to raise the Full Time Equivalent (FTE) post numbers and to maintain appliance availability for On Call stations. Significant challenges for the On Call stations remain as they seek to fulfill the near Wholtime (WT) station work requirements within much more limited time availability. Communications between the team working within Assets (Assets) and the SDA are becoming more regular and these should be established through governance processes. The Service's Unwanted Fire Alarm Signal (UFAS) policy has been implemented and has achieved a significant reduction in appliance mobilisations to these types of calls. Challenges remain with the requirement for regular replacement of fire and specialist appliances, and with the level of upgrades required to the property estate, including the remediation of Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) in stations, within current and future budget allocations made to the Service.



Responding to fire and other emergencies

There is strong evidence in place in support of the Service being able to receive and process emergency calls, mobilise the necessary resources and to effectively deal with operational incidents. Frontline staff are provided with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), kit, equipment and a wide range of fire appliances that allow them to do their jobs safely and effectively. The age of the spare appliance fleet in the SDA remains a challenge for the Service.



Opportunity
for improvement



Satisfactory



Good



Outstanding

HMFSI NSDA Rating Matrix



Partnership

How effective is the Service in the North SDA at working in partnership with others to improve community safety outcomes? We consider that partnership working is **good**.



Actively supporting partnership working to identify and protect the most vulnerable in the community

There is good partnership working across the area, both at formal and informal levels. The statutory community planning partnership structures are supported by officers within the North SDA. There are formalised referral pathways between partners to share information regarding those who are deemed to be at greatest risk within communities. SDA officer representation at LA scrutiny is praised for its consistency, and for their input and engagement with the process. The style and content of scrutiny committee performance papers was valued with qualitative showcase items used to create context. There appears to be a lack of an effective evaluation process, from either the Service or LA partners, for the outputs and outcomes that are being achieved from community safety initiatives. Whilst SFRS continues to develop the Community Asset Register (CAR), awareness of it is inconsistent with frontline staff. In remote areas, community resources are brought to bear in emergency situations outwith the formal approaches set out in the CAR. Some partners expressed frustration relating to the turnover of officers. The NSDA provides valued, strong and consistent representation to regional and local resilience partnerships.



**Opportunity
for improvement**



Satisfactory



Good



Outstanding

HMFSI NSDA Rating Matrix



People

How effective is the Service in the North SDA at managing and supporting its workforce? We consider that there is an **opportunity for improvement**.



Managing performance and developing leaders

The TOM for the WT in the North SDA is currently maintained at slightly over 100%. For the On Call, despite a range of proactive measures to recruit new personnel, the TOM is 35% below the levels that the Service aims to achieve. The Tracker system used for On Call recruitment is an effective system; however, administrative capacity to support it is limited following managed changes within the People Directorate. This has been shown to produce recruitment challenges at SDA and LSO level. Local On Call recruitment managers can often miss key dates on the tracker system, and this in turn can lead to extended recruitment processing times for new entrants to the Service. Recent Service changes to On Call contracts are positive and should remove barriers to entry for some who seek to join the SFRS. We found evidence of local design and delivery of leadership and management training by the SDA due to a lack of widespread provision from the Service. While we found evidence that officers and managers feel empowered to make decisions locally, this was against a backdrop of a view that corporate decision making is over-centralised. As was the case elsewhere within the Service, we found that staff appraisals are considered to be a bureaucratic process that do not act as a planning driver.



Ensuring people have the right skills and training

We found that Task and Task Management (TTM) initial training courses, and additional follow-on courses, can be difficult to access at the most appropriate training venues, and suitable times, for new in service On Call trainees. The National Instructor Pool (NIP) approach has been introduced to mixed reviews within the North SDA. Consistency of access to trainers from the now established Training Function at station level has still to be achieved. Changes to the Training for Competence (TFoC) programme for station based personnel has been very well received across the SDA. We had concerns expressed to us that the fire appliances used for driver training were aged and lack the full functionality and driver safety features that are found in more modern vehicles.



**Opportunity
for improvement**



Satisfactory



Good



Outstanding

HMFSI NSDA Rating Matrix

	People	How effective is the Service in the North SDA at managing and supporting its workforce? We consider that there is an opportunity for improvement.
	Supporting mental health and wellbeing	We found that the Service has in place systems and processes for personnel to access appropriate support from occupational health professionals when it is needed. Staff were mainly complimentary about the mental health support available to them. Details of this are readily available and placed in public areas on notice boards. We did note that no SFRS action plan is yet in place following the publication of our recent mental health thematic inspection report. While not a universal view, we found significant numbers of managers within the SDA who perceived there to be a lack of support in managing staff absence provided by human resource professionals within the Service.
	Promoting equality and diversity	We found that the Service had taken proactive measures aimed at making the workforce more representative of the communities it serves. The Service has a positive action strategy that assists with the recruitment of underrepresented groups to grow diversity within the workforce. There is mandatory professional behaviours and equality training for all staff, which is completed on an iterative basis. Despite these efforts, however, Service data shows gender and ethnic minority workforce balance continues to be disproportionate.

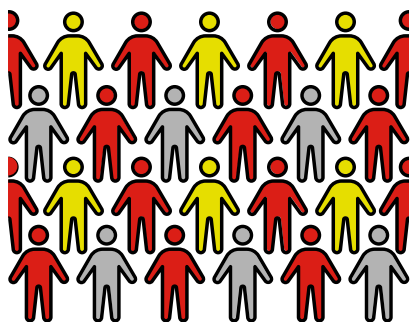
Conclusion

10. We are satisfied with some aspects of the performance of the SFRS within the North SDA, concluding that there are areas of satisfactory and good performance as well as opportunity for improvement. We found a generally good understanding of risk within the SDA and that the public receive a good service from the prevention and protection teams in the North. This is balanced against instances where the sharing of risk critical information following HFSVs with fire station crews was not carried out to the levels that we would expect, which highlights preventing fires and other risks as an opportunity for improvement. The SDA prepares satisfactorily for fires and other emergencies and, when required, responds well to them. There was good evidence to support our assessment that good partnership work is undertaken across the SDA, and that external partners value the contribution of the Service in this respect. Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of staff was found to be satisfactory which positively builds upon our recent report into mental health services offered by the SFRS to its staff. In terms of people management, we found that much work is ongoing, notably to try to improve On Call recruitment, this however has to be offset by areas of challenge, such as a reduction in administrative capacity to support this work.
11. During our inspection of the North SDA we found that the staff were motivated and engaged with their local management as they sought to deliver an effective service for the communities that the SFRS serves. There were areas of frustration for some within the SDA, particularly for the On Call as they seek to increase the level of personnel resource that they can attract into service to help with the maintenance of appliance availability across the North. However, this should be balanced against the general levels of satisfaction that we found within the workforce. Following consideration of this, and the issue of gender balance within the workforce, we have concluded that People is an overall opportunity for improvement for the Service.
12. The Inspection team would like to offer our thanks to Stephen Wood, the North SDA DACO, and his staff, who positively engaged, supported and worked with us during this inspection. Likewise, we would also thank all internal and external partners for their contribution and feedback throughout this process.

NSDA in Numbers

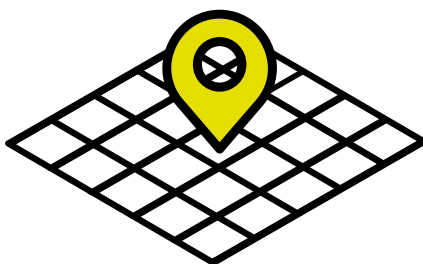
13. The SFRS in the NSDA protects a population of circa 1.312 million people and covers an area of 47,462 km². NSDA staff are based predominantly at 165 fire stations. Our approach for this inspection was to achieve a representative sample of interviews with NSDA personnel and SFRS support and functional staff who work alongside them. This approach was necessary given the geography of the north of Scotland and the remoteness of some of the communities who reside there, and the fire service facilities in place to protect them.

During the course of the inspection fieldwork, HMFSI carried out 54 station visits (33% of the total) and conducted 102 separate interviews with either watch officers or their crews. We also visited Dundee Operations Control (DOC) and conducted 5 separate interviews with watch officers, watches and Flexi Duty Officer (FDO) managers. In total for this inspection process we conducted interviews with station personnel, NSDA FDOs, Directorate staff and external LA and other Service partners for a total of 184 individual interview sessions.



1.3m

The NSDA serves a population of **1.3 million people**.



47,462km²

based across a wide ranging geography of some **47,462 square kilometres**.

165



North area crews are based at **165 fire stations**.

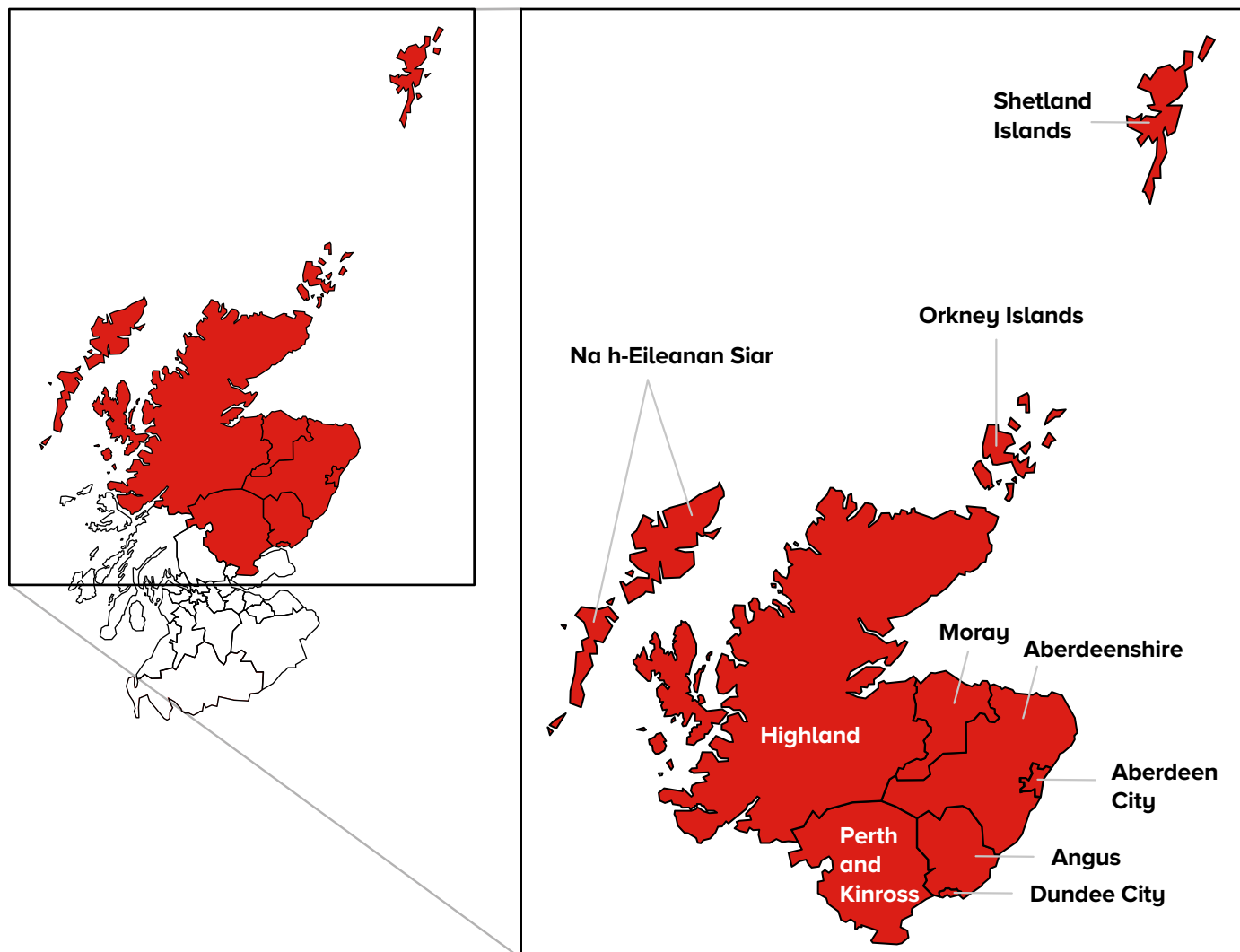
As at 31 March 2024 **2,957 SFRS service delivery personnel*** were based in the North.

2,957 uniformed staff



* Total Full Time Equivalent uniformed staff data provided by SFRS. There may be slight variance in total numbers due to rounding.

14. As of 31 March 2024, including FDO and off station personnel, there were 2,957 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) SFRS service delivery personnel based in the NSDA. The operational duty systems include Wholetime, Retained On Call, Volunteer On Call, Day Shift Duty Staffing and Flexi Duty. There are also a number of support staff duty systems employed, which vary according to the needs of the functional role.
15. The NSDA is made up of ten LA areas. These are Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, Angus, Western Isles, Dundee City, Highland, Moray, Orkney Islands, Perth and Kinross, Shetland Islands.
16. There are four Area Commanders who are designated, under the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005 (The Act), as Local Senior Officers (LSO). These LSOs lead the management of the SFRS's local activities in the NSDA. They each have responsibility for service delivery in either a single, in the case of Highland (HL), or in allocated groups of LA areas, i.e. Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire and Moray (ACAM); Perth & Kinross, Angus and Dundee (PKAD); Western Isles, Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands (WIOS).



Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire and Moray (ACAM)

Aberdeen City

17. There are four fire stations in Aberdeen City. Three of these stations are Wholetime and are located at Altens, Central, which also serves as the LSO Area HQ, and North Anderson Drive. The fourth station, Dyce, is staffed by On Call personnel operating the Retained Duty System. NSDA staff are based at Dyce, which serves as the SDA HQ.

Aberdeenshire

18. There are 24 fire stations in the Aberdeenshire area. Twenty-three of these stations are staffed by On Call personnel operating the Retained Duty System and one, Peterhead, is staffed by Wholetime and On Call personnel.

Moray

19. There are 11 fire stations in the Moray area, with Gordonstoun school hosting a volunteer appliance also. Ten of these stations are staffed by On Call personnel operating the Retained Duty System and one, Elgin, is staffed by Wholetime and On Call personnel. Some of the LSO staff and functional support staff are also based at Elgin.

ACAM Appliances

20. Across ACAM there are 52 pumping appliances, and a total of thirteen specialist appliances including one high reach appliance, two water rescue units, one rope rescue unit, one Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) unit, four Hazmat units, three water carriers and one High Volume Pump (HVP) unit.

Perth & Kinross, Angus and Dundee (PKAD)

Perth & Kinross

21. There are 14 fire stations in the Perth and Kinross area. One of these stations, Perth, is Wholetime. Thirteen of the stations are staffed by On Call personnel, with 10 operating the Retained Duty System and three operating the Volunteer Duty System. Some of the LSO and SFRS functional staff are also based at Perth.

Angus

22. There are six fire stations in the Angus area. One of these stations, Arbroath, is staffed by Wholetime and On Call personnel. Five of the stations are staffed by On Call personnel operating the Retained Duty System.

City of Dundee

23. There are four fire stations in the Dundee City area. Three of these stations are Wholetime with Balmossie staffed by Wholetime and On Call personnel operating the Retained Duty System. LSO staff are based at Blackness Road Fire Station which hosts the LSO Area HQ.

PKAD Appliances

24. Across PKAD there are 36 pumping appliances, and a total of ten specialist appliances including two high reach appliances, two water rescue units, one heavy rescue unit, one USAR unit, three Hazmat units, and one HVP unit.

Highland

25. There are 61 fire stations in the Highland area. One of these stations, Inverness, is staffed by Wholetime and On Call Retained Duty System personnel. Fifty-one of these stations are staffed by On Call personnel operating the Retained Duty System. The remaining nine stations operate as Community Response Units. LSO and SFRS functional staff are based at Inverness fire station which hosts the LSO Area HQ.

Highland Appliances

26. Across Highland there are 63 pumping appliances, and a total of 11 specialist appliances including one high reach appliance, two water rescue units, one heavy rescue unit, one USAR unit, three Hazmat units, one HVP unit and six Community Response Vehicles.

Western Isles, Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands (WIOS)

Western Isles

27. There are 14 fire stations on the Western Isles. All of these stations are staffed by On Call personnel operating the Retained Duty System. Some of the LSO and SFRS functional staff are based at Stornoway Fire Station which serves as a local District HQ for the Isles.

Orkney Islands

28. There are 12 fire stations on the Orkney Islands. All of these stations are staffed by On Call personnel operating the Retained Duty System. Some LSO and SFRS functional staff are based at Lerwick which serves as a local District HQ for the islands.

Shetland Islands

29. There are 14 fire stations on the Shetland Islands. All of these stations are staffed by On Call personnel operating the Retained Duty System. Some LSO and SFRS functional staff are based at Kirkwall which serves as a local District HQ for the islands.

WIOS Appliances

30. Across WIOS there are 46 pumping appliances.

Overview of Incident Data in the NSDA



9

In the year to 31 March 2024 there were **9 fatalities in accidental dwelling fires** in the NSDA



an increase of three from the previous year

88



There were **88 accidental dwelling fire non-fatal casualties**. **40** were classed as precautionary check-up

3,590

UFAS

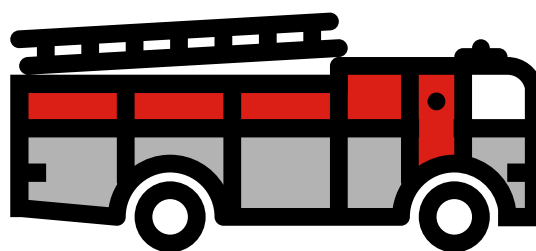
resulted in

5,928

fire appliance mobilisations



Of the **8,539** reported fire false alarms, **42% (3,590)** were **unwanted fire alarm signals**



Those 3,590 UFAS calls resulted in a total of **5,928 fire appliance mobilisations** in the year to 31 March 2024

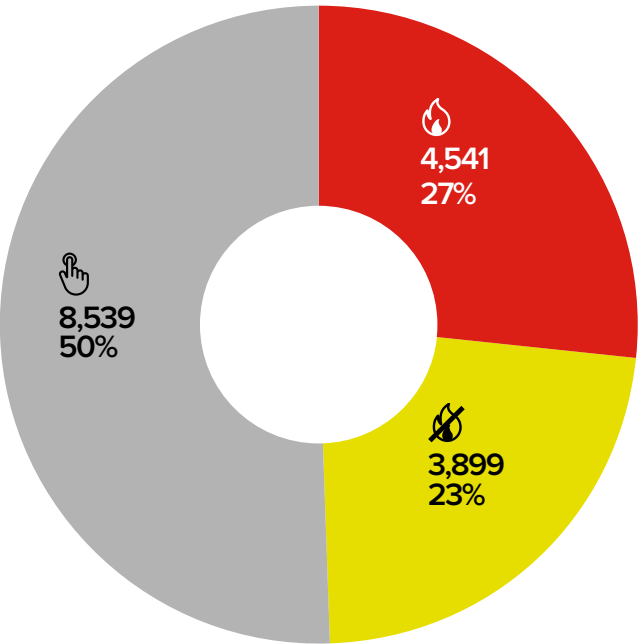
16,979

incidents in total

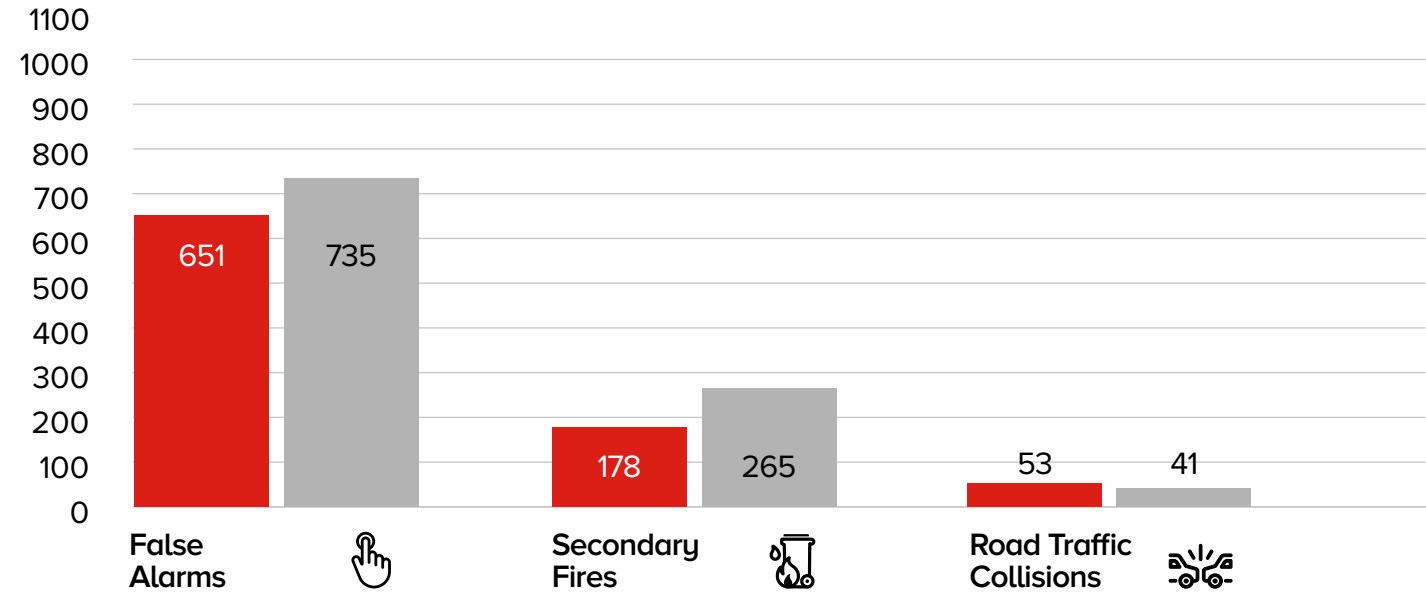
Fire stations in the NSDA attended a total of **16,979 incidents** in the year to 31 March 2024. A decrease of **3,620** from the year before



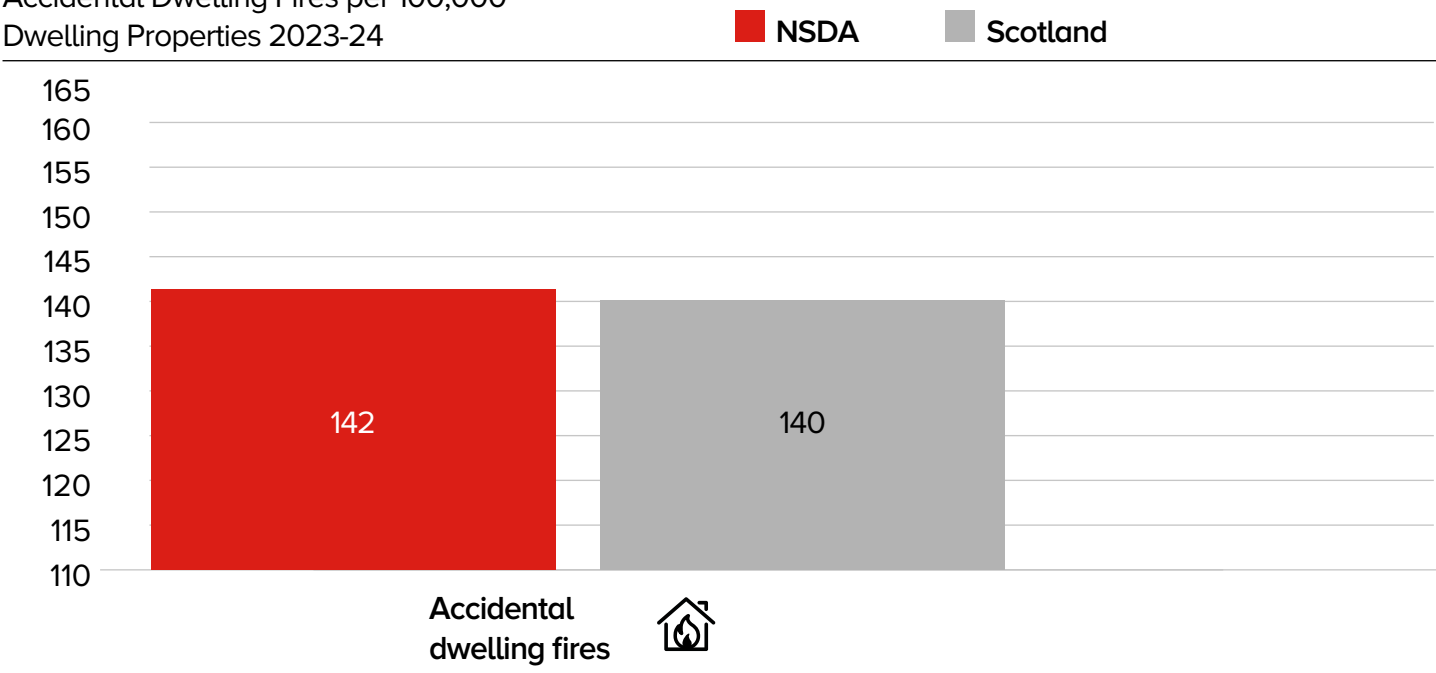
NSDA
Number of
Incidents Attended



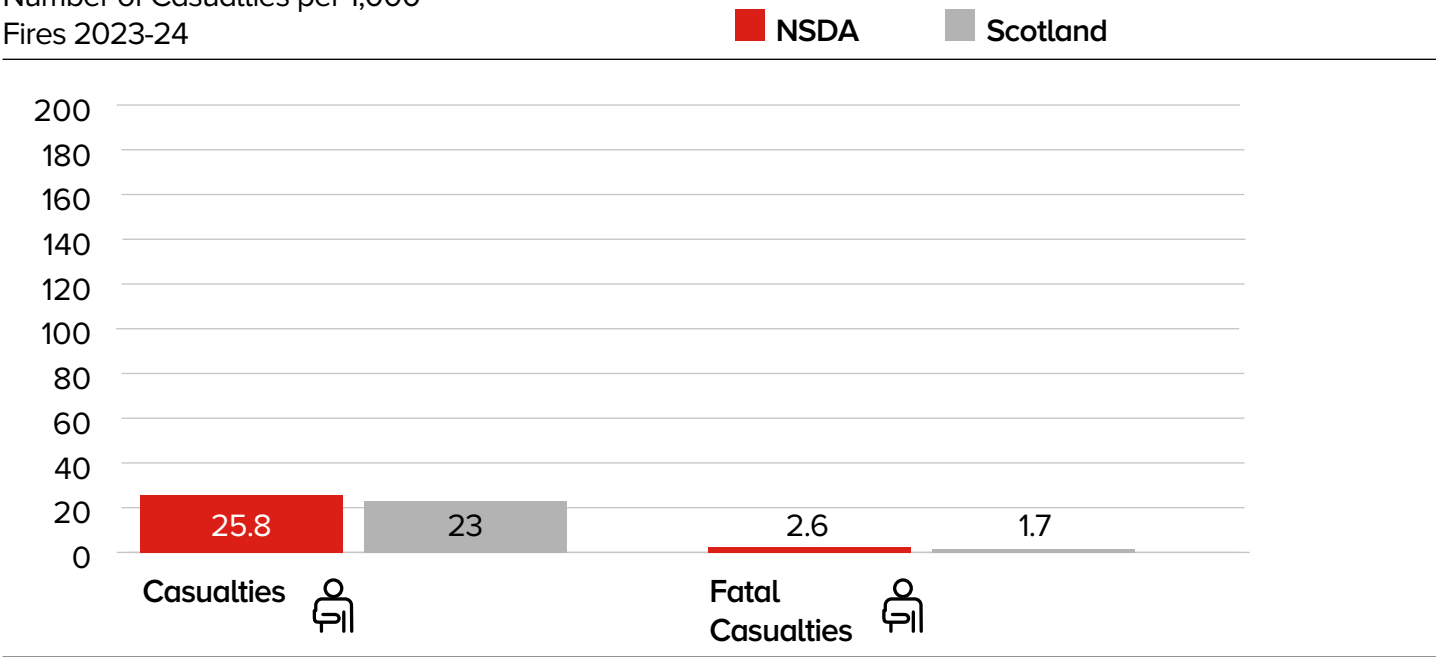
Incidents per 100,000
Population 2023-24



Accidental Dwelling Fires per 100,000 Dwelling Properties 2023-24

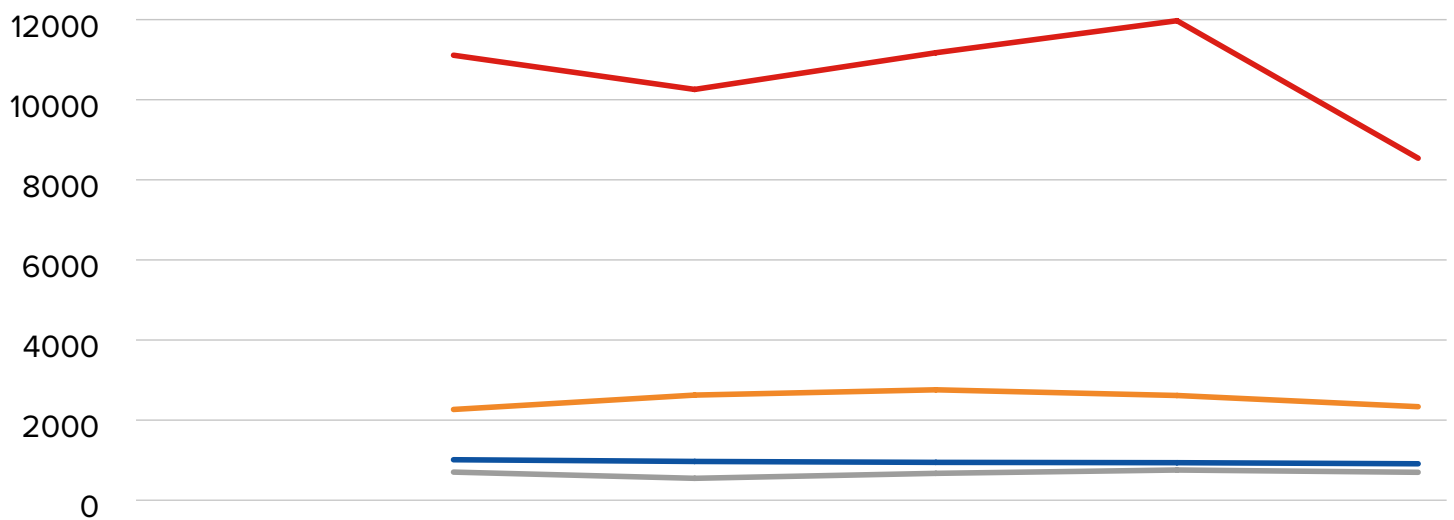


Number of Casualties per 1,000 Fires 2023-24



5-Year Trend

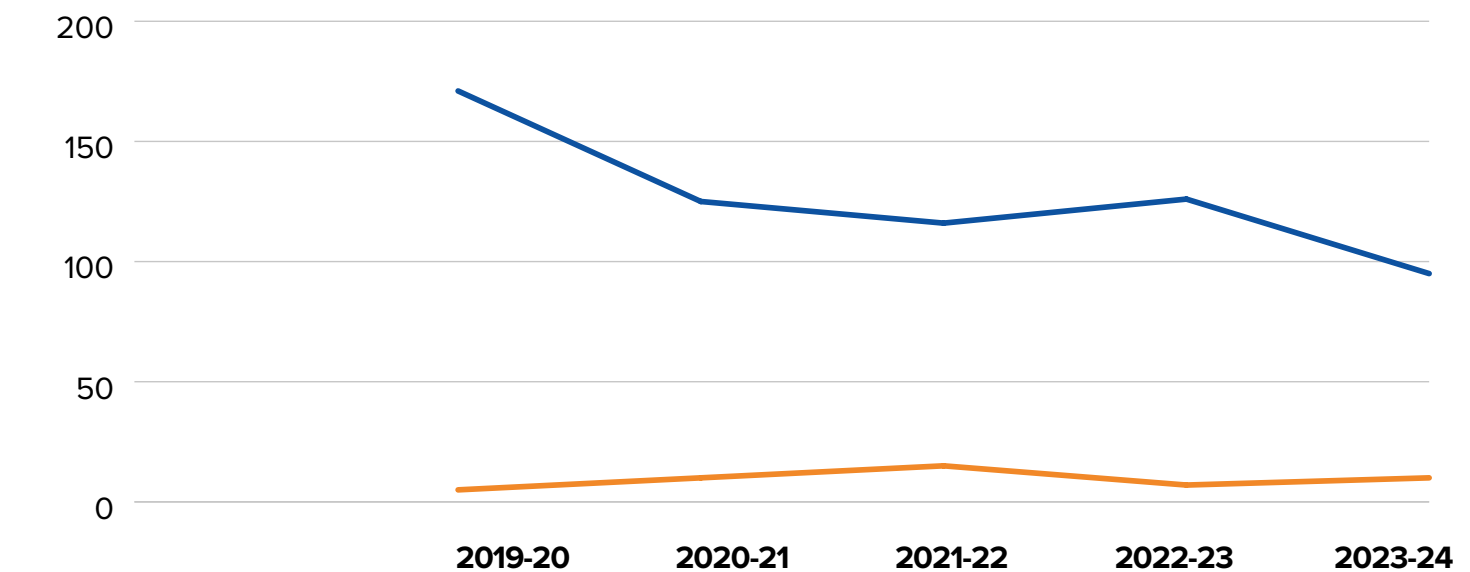
NSDA Incidents



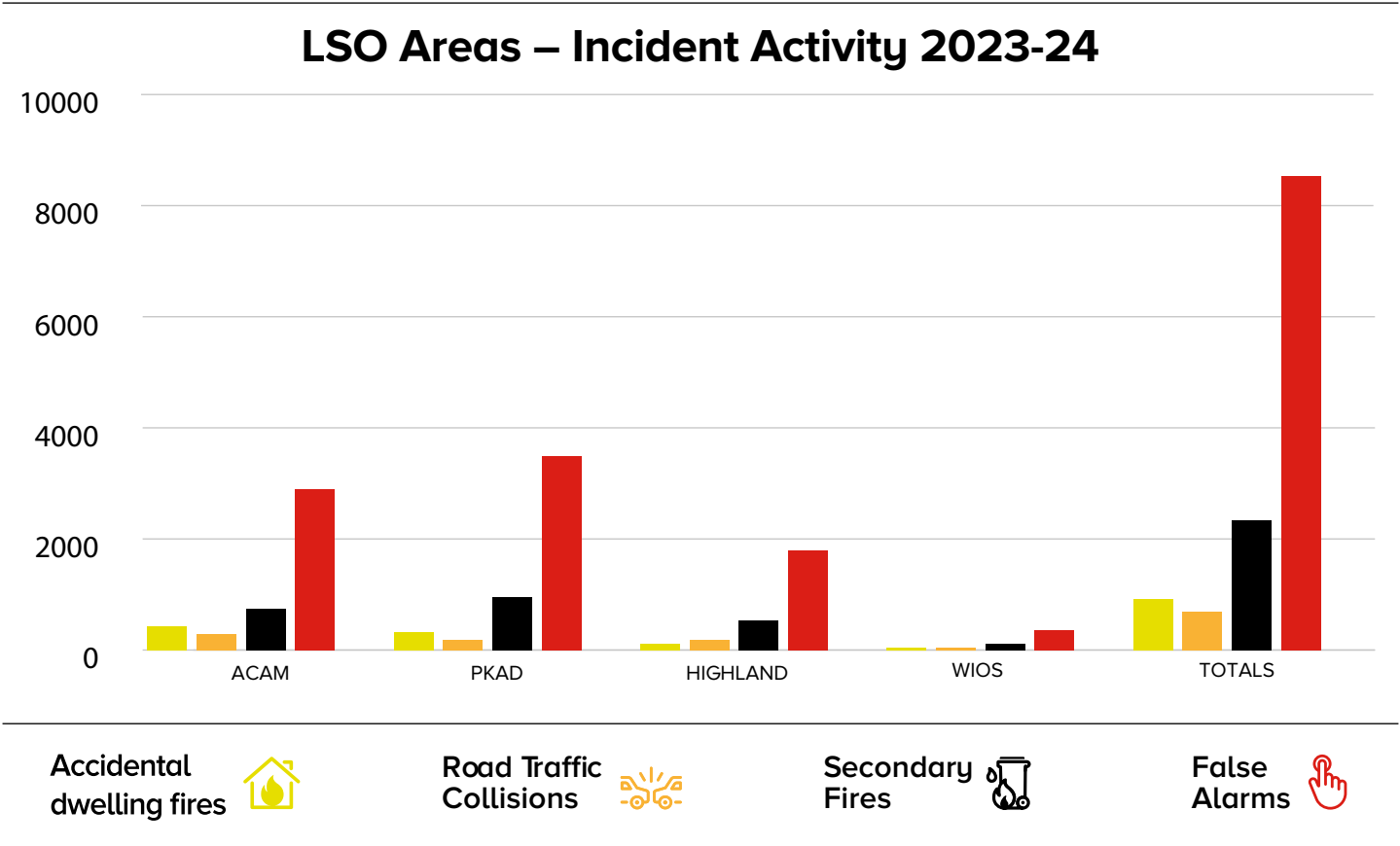
	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
 Accidental Dwelling Fires	1011	968	945	937	910
 Secondary Fires	2266	2625	2757	2615	2335
 RTCs	702	547	671	754	697
 False Alarms	1111	10257	11173	11973	8539

5-Year Trend

NSDA Dwelling Fire Casualties



 Dwelling Fire Casualties	171	125	116	126	95
 Dwelling Fire Fatal Casualties	5	10	15	7	10



North SDA Issues in Focus

31. This report is the third in a series of SDA inspections. As expected, there was a degree of crossover of issues raised by Service personnel, and in the comments made by the three inspection teams deployed by HMFSI during each of the SDA inspections. This report has acknowledged the consistency of findings from the East and West SDAs but sought where possible to avoid simply reiterating the points put forward in the previous reports' text. To add context and depth to the discussion points, we took a deeper dive into several topical areas that have been consistently raised by SFRS personnel during our other SDA inspections, and which subsequently formed talking points with Service managers following the previous report publications.

32. For this approach we spoke directly with a number of managers within the Service who have responsibility for the delivery of training strategy outcomes, process outcomes and/or the provision of physical appliances, equipment and PPE. These specific interview sessions allowed an opportunity for the 'right of reply' to those who have responsibility within the Service for the delivery of outcomes and outputs in advance of this report's finalisation and publication. We feel that this approach has allowed a balanced view to be reflected within the report's narrative. These topical subjects have been termed **In Focus**, and cover the areas of:

- HFSV's Risk Critical Information
- Assets
- On Call Recruitment
- Training and Organisational Development.

Summary of Findings

Prevention and Protection – How effective is the Service in the North SDA at keeping communities safe and secure?

33. To be effective, the SFRS must identify and assess the full range of relevant and foreseeable fire and rescue risks its communities face. It should target its prevention activities to those who are at greatest risk and enable compliance with fire safety legislation through its protection work, carrying out enforcement action when required. **The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's overall effectiveness within the North SDA is judged to be Satisfactory.**

Governance

34. The Fire (Scotland) Act 2005 (the Act) requires the SFRS to publish a Local Fire and Rescue Plan (LFRP) for each Local Authority area. The plans set out the SFRS's priorities and objectives for that area; why they have been selected; how the SFRS intends to deliver them and (as far as is practicable) outcomes by reference to which the SFRS's service delivery in the LA area can be measured. We examined all the LFRP in the NSDA and found that they have assessed a good range of risks and threats and were of a good quality. The plans give a description of the area, highlighting the various risks which may exist and where relevant, the actions of the SFRS and its partners to mitigate those risks. When assessing risk, each plan has considered relevant information from a broad range of internal and external sources. This includes data from other blue light organisations and resilience partners, historical incidents, as well as social and economic information. As might be expected, there were similarities in the content of the plans aligned to the LSO areas.

35. In common with the East and West SDA reports, the decision to delay the development and publication of new LFRP for the North remains in place. The existing plans were reviewed as the SFRS charts its way forward for Service review and redesign. This approach has not stopped

SFRS personnel in the North from continuing to achieve outputs and outcomes, but it is acknowledged that there is a drag in terms of strategic planning approaches. A number of SFRS LA partners admitted to a degree of frustration with the delay in the production of the new LFRP, but also voiced their understanding and acceptance that it would not be a worthwhile exercise to produce new plans in advance of any strategic or structural changes to the Service.

36. We were informed and found some evidence that the Service in the NSDA has developed Station Plans which give a local context and tie-in for activities that should align to the LFRP. We were advised by the NSDA management team that station plans had been developed and should be in place in the locations that we were scheduled to visit. While the plans were available or known about at some locations, disappointingly this was not the case in the majority of fire stations that were visited. Despite a lack of visibility of the formalised plans, our Inspection survey strongly indicated that personnel in the NSDA were aware of what the priorities were for their workplace.

37. In WT stations there was significant focus on a localised seven week planner system that guided much of the work undertaken by the station and its personnel. In the case of On Call stations there was a near universal use of the station practical training TFoC system to maximise the capacity that is available on station drill nights. Both WT and On Call personnel often cited outcome reports as their guide for planning work for upcoming periods of time, confusing planning with reporting. There appeared to be limited linkage, in most instances, between Strategic level plans, Station plans, and the appraisals of personnel, as is set out within the SFRS Good Governance Framework 2023.

38. Where we did find a station or a watch that could identify the Station Plan and clearly understand the linkages between strategic and station plans, station work outputs and outcomes as well as personnel appraisals, their understanding was to exceptionally high levels. Unfortunately, these exemplar level stations were the exception and not the rule.

Recommendation 1



The SFRS should engage with fire station staff to ensure that the importance of the Good Governance Framework, and how it should be used to guide their work at a local level (including appraisals) and also provide linkages to Service strategic plans, is understood by all staff. This is particularly important for Watch Officers who need to manage local work outputs and outcomes, and who will be the SFRS middle and strategic level managers of the future.

Prevention and Engagement

39. Preventing incidents occurring is accepted as the most effective way of mitigating the impact of fire and other incidents upon our communities. Prevention is focused on the people most at risk from fire and other hazards, such as road traffic collisions etc. Each LSO area has a Local Prevention Delivery Plan (LPDP), which outlines the work of the Local Authority Liaison Officer (LALO), Community Action Team (CAT) and front line firefighters that aligns with Service priorities and their local requirements. Prevention work, carried out by these staff groups, seeks to improve the safety, health and wellbeing of communities leading to a reduction in incidents, injuries, and fatalities. The SFRS works with a wide range of partners and the LPDP should guide and prepare staff to work efficiently and effectively to support the communities that the NSDA serves. The LALO and CAT are there to support, add capacity

where it is needed, and to enhance the work undertaken by frontline operational staff. Work undertaken is recorded on the Community Safety Engagement Tool (CSET).

40. Across the NSDA we could evidence many examples of work where station personnel, LALOs and CAT personnel were actively engaged in a very wide range of activities that pushed the safety agenda that the Service is pursuing. We also came across many examples of initiatives that tied into the outcomes that were being pursued by LAs in line with their CPPs and LOIPs. LA partners that we spoke with held the SFRS contributions to their CPP and LOIP outcomes in the highest regard. Chief amongst the outcomes being pursued was to reduce poverty for members of the community, and there are numerous examples of this work being undertaken by watches across the NSDA e.g. Partnership Approach to Water Safety, breakfast clubs, Brew With the Crew, Food Poverty Initiatives, Youth Football, Fire Skills, School Competitions, Young Fire Setters intervention programme and hoarding interventions. This work is all commendable and clearly adds social value as well as allowing ample opportunity for early years engagement and interventions that align to fire safety strategies and outcomes that the SFRS will be pursuing.

41. While we agree that there is significant social value to be gained through the community safety work that is undertaken in the NSDA, and indeed across the SFRS, we found that there was limited evaluation of the outputs or outcomes that these initiatives are seeking to achieve. As the Service considers options to realign its resources to meet the future risk demand across Scotland, the amount of capacity that will be available for utilisation on these initiatives will inevitably require to be considered. SFRS personnel use their capacity to deliver outputs, often to exemplary standards. To best target available resources to the point of greatest need in future, it would greatly assist the process if the outcomes from previous initiatives had been systematically evaluated. During this inspection process we found no LA partner of the SFRS who conducted what we would consider to be an effective evaluation process. With so much of the Services capacity aligned to LA partners

efforts in tackling their top priority of poverty, the need for joined-up evaluation of initiatives is a pressing one.

Recommendation 2



The SFRS should work with partners to develop and implement an evaluation system that scores and grades the inputs, outputs and outcomes of the many Community Safety (CS) initiatives that it undertakes. This evaluation system should allow qualified decisions on where, and on what, initiatives to focus the resources of the Service.

42. We found that frontline crews continue to deliver a range of traditional fire and other safety related activities such as HFSV, vulnerable person referral pathways, SFRS Thematic Action Plans (TAPS) such as fireworks and bonfire initiatives, Gala day attendances, Cubs, Scouts and school visits to local fire station, safety talks to local Nurseries, local schools and local residential care homes and independent living facilities. While there is clearly activity ongoing, we often received comments that suggested the level of activity undertaken is not as high as it traditionally had been in the pre Covid pandemic period. Another common issue that was raised by both station personnel and CAT personnel was the challenge in gaining access to schools, and in particular secondary schools, curriculum time which was considered to be limited.

Good Practice 1



An example of the important and value adding work that is undertaken by CSA, CAT, and LALO teams was on an island that has no fire station (of which there are six within WIOS). One individual formed a partnership approach with the local GP to gain an insight to the people living within this community. Of the 94 properties on the island, 49 had elderly residents who had a range of vulnerabilities. Each elderly resident household on the island was subsequently visited and a HFSV carried out, with important safety messaging shared and vulnerabilities noted.

43. Across the NSDA we found CAT and LALO personnel engaged in a wide range of community safety engagement, education and prevention work and initiatives. In general, the CAT and LALO appear to have positive working relationships with station based operational personnel. We did however receive a number of comments from the operational crews who felt that the CAT/LALO personnel would often pass work onto them with little or no prior discussion and then leave them to produce the outcomes from community safety focused initiatives etc. Conversely, we also received comments from station based personnel who felt that their contact and support from CAT and LALO personnel was too limited.

44. While the CAT personnel that we spoke with were very clearly committed to their work, they voiced frustration at the lack of SFRS Continuous Professional Development (CPD) opportunities beyond mandatory training modules that must be completed every three years. A number of CAT personnel told us that LA and other partners offer more access to CPD events and training opportunities than the Service does. A similar finding appears in the East and West SDA reports.
45. It was clear from our interviews that the LALO and CAT roles work well together. However, there was frustration from CAT personnel about the perceived quick turnover of LALOs, who effectively function as their line management route. Allied to this was the ongoing frustration, also reported in the East and West SDA reports, about the lack of career opportunities or pathways to other roles for the CAT personnel. One solution suggested by the CAT personnel was for the SFRS to consider a non-uniformed role within their team to assume the managerial responsibilities that are currently undertaken by the LALOs.
46. In the early years of the SFRS, local area teams could bid for and utilise finance for local initiatives from a ring-fenced budget known as 'the Chief Officer's Fund'. The removal of this fund continues to be a source of concern and frustration for the CAT. Discretionary spend on a wide range of safety products such as deaf alarm pillows, fire retardant bedding etc., that could previously be targeted at vulnerable or high-risk members of the community is generally not now achievable without externally sourced funding. CAT personnel have undertaken work and invested significant team capacity into sourcing and securing external funding via charities that could be used to purchase a range of products used for the achievement of community safety outcomes. They described the process for them to have external funding accepted into the Service as "administratively tough" and more difficult than it possibly should be. The final consideration for the utilisation of any secured external funding was that it can only be spent on SFRS central contracts, which the CAT do not consider, in the circumstances in which they wish to spend this finance, to offer good value as the cost of goods appears higher than it would be on the open market.

Recommendation 3



The SFRS should consider the current arrangements that allows external funding for initiatives to be brought into the Service with a view to streamlining them to facilitate these financial inflows. These processes should consider the entry of external funding as well as the most appropriate value for money route to spending which maximises outcomes.

In Focus: HFSV's Risk Critical Information

47. Home Fire Safety Visits (HFSVs) are a cornerstone in the SFRS strategy to keep members of Scotland's communities safe in their homes. HMFSI understand that a new policy on the delivery of HFSVs is planned, and that it will lead to a stronger focus on high-risk households. During our fieldwork in the East and West SDAs it became noticeable that there may be some inconsistencies about how the information gained from a household could be used and who should be informed of it. This issue affected mostly On Call stations, where a number of reasons exist for HFSVs not being conducted by the crew members themselves but by the CAT members.
48. When conducting the NSDA fieldwork, specific questions were asked to allow the Inspection team to probe this issue further. While the practices we were informed of were not universal across the North, the information that was uncovered and triangulated across multiple interviews was significant enough that it was considered as a suitable 'In Focus' topic for this report. At the root of this issue is not just the safety of members of the public, but also of the firefighters who may be called to their homes in response to an emergency call.
49. While interviewing CAT personnel, we were informed on a number of occasions that high risk HFSVs had been marked on CSET as "leave for CAT team". This was to ensure that a timeous visit could be undertaken to a household when there may not be the personnel resources available at On Call

stations to do so or, in the opinion of the CAT, a higher level of CS knowledge may be required to make the HFSV as effective as it could be. HMFSI fully understand and appreciate this approach. The concern that we have, and which was borne out during our field work, is that firefighter safety critical information that is identified during the visit is often not made available to the home station personnel. This in our view presents a level of avoidable risk that could lead to negative operational outcomes.

50. The issue was crystalised during a visit to an On Call station who had attended a household several times for secondary fires and who had offered a HFSV on multiple occasions, all of which were refused. The crew subsequently attended a serious housefire at the premises, which was caused by misuse of matches by children, and which led to the family being rehomed in temporary accommodation in a neighbouring town. Following this incident the WC contacted CAT to discuss the premises in question and was informed that the household was indeed known to them, and that a HFSV had been conducted by them. The CAT confirmed that no information that had been gained during the HFSV had been passed to the On Call station.
51. This outcome was a concern to the WC who subsequently set up a local intelligence gathering group that consisted of the SFRS, police, local NHS partners, local social housing partners and local elected members of the Council. The meetings for this group are hosted at the fire station and intelligence is shared that could impact the safety of the community or of the public services who may attend any household locally.
52. This group shared intelligence about the temporary and then permanent rehousing of the family into their original home following its repair. At that time the crew offered a HFSV to the householder which was again refused. A subsequent offer was made and accepted by another member of the household and it was promptly undertaken. On entering the home, they found and noted a number of causes of concern, which given the previous history of the household could impact firefighter safety in future.
53. Subsequent interviews for this inspection confirmed that the practice of not sharing safety critical information with local stations, although not universal, was worryingly widespread across some areas. When questioned directly about the practice, CAT members advised that they did not share the information to ensure that the SFRS complied with GDPR and data protection regulations. One long serving CAT member told us that they were “limited in what they could tell crews (post HFSV), we haven’t been told definitively what we can share, we just don’t do it”. A senior NSDA FDO advised us that the view that HFSV information should not be shared was a commonly held one in areas of the North and that Information Governance instructed this.
54. To pursue the perception that data protection is a more paramount concern in relation to firefighter safety critical post-HFSV, the inspection team conducted an interview with a member of the SFRS Information Governance team. They informed us that safety of firefighters would be the paramount concern, but that data and information must also be dealt with confidentially and sensitively. It also transpired that following a previous but unrelated significant data issue for the SFRS that specific training regarding data protection had been delivered to personnel from P&P, including SCs, CAT, and LALOs. This training was described as “directive” and was firmly delivered following what was a serious incident for the SFRS. It appears that this directive training to address a data protection incident in the Service has led to a conflation of what HFSV information should be treated in strict confidence and not openly shared, even when it appears to be potentially risk-critical for firefighters in an operational context.
55. It is our view that there are restrictions on the sharing of safety critical information following HFSVs being conducted by CAT members in some areas of the North. It is also clear that this has the potential to lead to serious negative outcomes for attending fire crews at operational incidents who may not be in possession of the full intelligence picture that could be available. These gaps in operational intelligence are avoidable.

Recommendation 4

The SFRS should engage with Information Governance, CAT, LALO, Prevention, Protection and Preparedness (PPP) and operational personnel to review how Firefighter safety critical Information should be recorded and then disseminated following HFSVs. This should be done as a matter of urgency.

Protection

56. The NSDA contains a very wide range of non-domestic properties including those in the health and care sector, industry, tourism and hospitality sector etc. For most non-domestic buildings in Scotland the SFRS is the enforcing authority for fire safety as set out in the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005. Many of these premises are deemed 'relevant premises' by the Act and as such will have 'duty holders', responsible for ensuring that suitable and adequate fire safety measures are in place within them. As the enforcing authority, the SFRS has a legal duty to ensure that advice and guidance is given to duty holders and to ensure enforcement of the Act.

57. The SFRS PPP Directorate operates a system of proactive fire safety audits within premises, reactive audits in premises where fires have occurred, and dealing with complaints, enquiries and contraventions. This system is functional in support of the SDAs and should ensure a consistent approach across Scotland. Proactive audits are conducted using a risk-based approach, following a national enforcement framework, which focuses on those premises which are considered to represent the highest life risk from fire. These premises include care homes, hospitals and sleeping accommodation premises such as hotels.

58. Each LSO has a LEDP which sets out the work priorities for the PPP local FDO managers, Fire Safety Enforcement Officers (FSEO) and Auditing Officers (AO). Across the NSDA we were informed that the LEDP is a valuable governance tool as it details local priorities for framework premises. These are then placed

onto a risk-based register for the audits to be undertaken by the FSEO and AO personnel as part of a structured work plan. Each FSEO has a work target of 122 audits that require to be undertaken each year. Audit targets are generally considered by the FSEOs to be achievable. We were advised however, that they can be impacted by unplanned work, such as reactive audit inspections, dealing with complaints from the public, and most notably by the ongoing volume of STL licencing applications. The achievement of the 122 annual audit target can also be impacted by capacity being lost to dealing with compliments, complaints and enquiries that are received by the FSEO team. There was a systematic approach to dealing with this work, and it is dealt with in a consistent manner across the NSDA. The work generated by complaints and enquiries, however, is often uncredited and it can impact available audit capacity. Similarly, there have been prohibition and enforcement notices served on duty holders of premises within the NSDA. These notices attract high levels of media, legal and LA scrutiny and as such they are dealt with as a priority and require significant resources and time to be expended on them. One other significant factor that can impact upon the achievement of the audit target, is the geography of the NSDA and the travel distances and planning that may be required to reach any relevant premises for audits to be undertaken.

59. During our inspection, PPP personnel reported that STL licencing applications have placed a very high demand upon the capacity of the enforcement team. The SFRS is a consultee for these licence applications. Across the four LSO Areas that make up the NSDA there is an ongoing STL application backlog that collectively numbers in the hundreds. The number of licences applied for remains consistently high due to the volume of new applications that are made; this is despite the efforts of the SFRS to reduce them. There was a similar picture for STL applications within the East and West SDAs. STL licencing is a challenge for the SDAs as each LA has a slightly different approach and there remains a lack of guidance from the PPP Directorate on how these should be processed. This has led to LSO areas applying different approaches. The duty for the issuing of STL licences lies with the LA, who will issue a licence to the

applicant. One NSDA LSO has introduced a change to correspondence letters to emphasise the 'advisory' role played by SFRS and to free up auditor capacity. It is hoped that this approach, which we are told has reduced demand, will place the workload back onto the LA which both issues the licence and charges a fee for doing so. This should hopefully allow the enforcement team to focus on high-risk premises when their expertise may be required. STL demands are a large drain on the NSDA enforcement teams' capacity, for which there is no facility for recharge of service back to the issuing LA, who charge circa £600 per licence. In recognition of the lack of capacity to deal with STL applications, several contracts for three hours per week have recently been issued to On Call staff within the SDA. This will clearly assist in alleviating some of the work pressure, but it is another financial cost that is being borne by the SFRS.

Good Practice 2



The Service recently introduced a change to its STL licencing paperwork to emphasise the 'advisory' role played by the SFRS in the process. This is a positive move that should reduce the capacity that is required for this function.

Recommendation 5



The SFRS should produce national STL guidance for use across the Service SDAs. They should produce national STL governance documents for issue to licence applicants that makes clear the role of the SFRS and the primary role of the LA issuer. The SFRS should engage LAs to allow a common understanding of the role that both parties play in the issuing of STL licences.

60. Like other groups of personnel across the SFRS in recent times, the enforcement team has lost staff to retirement ahead of projected leaving dates. This is due in part to changes in pension regulations. We understand that the gaps in the team have been addressed but that there is now a significant number who are not yet classed as being experienced or competent in role, which is estimated to take two years to achieve. This has been ameliorated to some degree by the recent employment of two former experienced FSEOs as support staff AOs. These two AOs operate on a peripatetic basis across the NSDA. We are told that their previous skills and experience have been a welcome addition, and that they are effective mentors for the new enforcement team members as they work towards competence status. To assist with the challenges of geography, training for local training officers and On Call Support Watch Commanders (OCSWC) within WIOS is to be undertaken to establish a cadre of auditors. While we welcome initiatives such as this, it must be tempered by the expectations that might be placed upon these personnel and the level of audit that they should be expected to undertake, as well as the level of support that they will need from PPP, as they work towards achieving competence in this role.

Good Practice 3



Personnel have been placed on training courses to allow them to gain Fire Safety modules qualifications in advance of them joining PPP as FSEOs. This learning is supported by time allowances by the Service.

61. The SFRS utilises the IT-based PPED to record premises audit outcomes. In keeping with the findings of the East and West SDA reports, we received a number of comments regarding PPED. The most positive comment we received was that "it works to a certain degree", but in the main it was not viewed positively. The system can be frustrating and challenging to use for those who are required to enter audit data into it. We were advised that loss of data is a frequent occurrence and has led

to FSEOs maintaining their own records of audit outcomes and PDF captures of inputs to PPED to mitigate this. FSEOs told us that the duplication of data input and capture impacts their efficiency and leaves them concerned that important audit information could be lost due to the inherent operating flaws of PPED. Within the NSDA a workplan approach has been created which allows FSEOs and AOs to view the audit workload, which is categorised by risk, and to tackle it on that basis. This has not been Service-driven, but was developed locally as the PPED system does not have this level of functionality.

62. PPP staff working in the NSDA informed us of consistently positive and professional working relationships with a range of external partners in the NHS, LA licencing and building control teams. Engagement and information exchange with these partners is conducted on a near daily basis to ensure that the highest priority cases for licencing and audits are promptly dealt with.

Preparedness

Operational Intelligence

63. The SFRS has a statutory duty to obtain information which may be required by its personnel in carrying out their operational role. When information is created, either by collection as part of that duty or through the writing of an operational policy, such as a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for an incident type, it is made available to firefighters through a demountable Getac tablet device within the cab of the fire appliance.
64. The provision of up-to-date and accurate information to firefighters is important in effectively responding to incidents when they occur. We saw varying quantities of available information across the NSDA LSO areas. There are processes in place for firefighters to collect OI. However, we noted that in areas covered by On Call appliances, firefighters from those stations were often less likely to be involved in the collection process. The reasons for this were varied, but in the main it was due to their non availability in relation to their primary employment responsibilities. A number of stations did have an On Call firefighter with the work reference for the collation of OI, and these individuals would often work with the local OCSWC to ensure that the relevant data was collected and input to the OI system. Where this system is in place

there is the obvious advantage of collation by a member of the local personnel. However, we did not find a consistent level of assurance that the information was then fully imparted to the remainder of the On Call crew. We found that the maintenance of OI knowledge for an On Call crew was one of a number of items that were subject to the time pressures of the weekly training night.

65. During this inspection we received many affirmations that the OI system, and the demountable tablet that holds it, is used in an operational capacity. We found that this use was in the main to confirm hydrant locations, occasionally to check details of SOPs and unfortunately in rarer instances, “where time allowed”, at or enroute to an operational incident, to check the OI information of a site or premises. The use of the system on the islands was deemed to be less effective due to the Getac tablet requiring, for update purposes, to be located off the fire appliances and thus needing to be physically gathered as part of a station mobilisation.
66. The OI system is being used in an innovative way across the NSDA to ensure that site-specific information (SSI) that has been gathered from HFSVs can be accessed by operational crews. This information would normally be logged by the OC team on the SFRS mobilising system and be automatically generated for responding operational crews when an emergency call is received. The Service has recently announced the procurement of a new mobilising system. The existing system is now aged and cannot have significant amounts of new data input to it. In the intervening period before the new system comes live, the use of the OI system to log SSI is an approach that allows firefighters to have a fuller picture of the vulnerabilities that may be relevant to persons who reside in locations that they are mobilising to.

Good Practice 4



The use of the Operational Intelligence System to log and make Site-Specific Information that is gathered during HFSVs accessible to operational crews via appliance Getac tablets is a good example of innovation.

67. As has been previously reported in the 2019 HMFSI Thematic Inspection report of the management and provision of risk information, and the East and West SDA reports, there remains issues with the automatic up-dating of the Getac tablet device. This is a national problem and one that the Service has been trying to address. It is disappointing that these issues have not been resolved, and it is of concern that firefighters may not have ready access to the most up-to-date information. HMFSI has also had a demonstration of the new system and hardware that will replace the current OI arrangements, and we are encouraged with the potential that it appears to have.

Business Continuity Plans

68. Business Continuity Planning (BCP) within the NSDA is based on guidance in line with the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (CCA). The Act requires the SFRS to plan and to consider foreseeable hazards and threats to the ongoing business of the Service, and to put in place mitigation for any impact from these. Within the NSDA, the Civil Contingencies Officer (CCO) cadre have received formal training on the formulation of BCPs and support the local LSOs in developing and reviewing plans for their stations and sites. For this report we sampled existing NSDA BCPs and found them to be complete, correctly detailed, current and within their review cycle. There was recent support provided by NSDA CCOs for a review of fallback sites that would be used should fire stations be rendered unusable for any reason; these details are included within existing BCPs. The CCOs deliver local BCP training to the LSO teams and their officers who will have responsibility for the compilation and review of the local plans. We are content that BCPs have been developed and are in place for the NSDA and that these are reviewed on a sampling basis with the support of the CCO group.

Response – How effective is the Service in the NSDA at responding to incidents when they do occur?

69. An effective Fire and Rescue Service will, when the public calls for help, ensure its firefighters respond promptly and possess the right skills, knowledge and equipment to deal with the incident effectively. **The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's overall effectiveness within the North SDA is judged to be Satisfactory.**

Staffing

70. Similar to the East and West SDAs, in the NSDA the Service operates the WT and On Call duty systems to crew its appliances. WT station appliances are crewed 24 hours per day, 365 days per year by fulltime firefighters across the Five Watch Duty System (5WDS). On Call station appliances are crewed by personnel who live and work in the vicinity of the fire station, wear a pager, and provide a commitment to respond to emergency calls that are made to the SFRS as and when required. On Call personnel will also attend their station one evening per week for 2 to 3 hours to fulfil their training and administration commitments. The On Call group will also often utilise extra hours that are made available by the LSO management team to fulfil specific work requirements e.g. operational training, community safety engagement work or the collation of OI related to their station risk. The On Call personnel group align to the Retained Duty System for much of this staff group but also encompasses a small number of Volunteer stations and their personnel.

71. In common with the East and West SDAs, and as set out previously in those reports, the Central Staffing function monitors the availability of 5WDS personnel and aims for WT station appliances to be crewed appropriately. Central Staffing will regularly consult with the SDA and LSO teams to ascertain availability and have the authority to move personnel between stations and to utilise non fixed workdays, known as 'Orange Days', on an individual basis to ensure appropriate crewing levels are maintained as often as is possible.

72. The SFRS operates a policy which determines a fire station crewing level which is expressed as the Full Time Equivalent (FTE) based against a Target Operating Model (TOM). The TOM is the number of personnel who, in ideal circumstances, are available to crew and operate the emergency response appliances of any station. Any reduction in the FTE will inevitably have a detrimental impact upon the Service's ability to have all its emergency response vehicles available. The SFRS provided statistical data that showed an FTE level for WT North SDA personnel of 100.93% relative to the Target Operating Model (TOM). The FTE for On Call RDS was 65.65% which equates to a difference of 664 personnel. The On Call Volunteer FTE was 71%, but with much lower numbers of these personnel this equates to a shortfall of 29. Any deficit of the FTE rate has been shown in the East and West SDA to have the potential to impact the availability of the Service appliances. This can lead to high levels of detached duties, appliance removals and/or increased salary payments to operational staff who may be called into stations on overtime to make good staff shortages. The deficit in the On Call FTE is most clearly shown in the numbers of vacancies at some fire stations in the NSDA, with this having knock on effects for appliance availability. It should also be noted that there are many On Call fire station where the FTE number of firefighters is significantly below 100%, but they have managed to maintain appliance availability to commendably high levels. The On call station in Hoy for example has a vacancy rate at 75% but manages to achieve availability at commendably high overall levels of 86%, with that figure being 94% for evenings and weekends.

73. The overall level of WT FTE in the NSDA is welcomed, but it does not tell the full story regarding station operational personnel availability. We have found the NSDA to have unique logistical considerations regarding travel distances between a number of its fire stations. Travel distances between some NSDA stations,

both On Call and WT, are such that they effectively become 'mainland located islands' that are isolated from their neighbour stations. These stations must be self-sufficient in many ways including the provision of personnel. A case in point is Inverness WT station which has a TOM of 70 personnel and an FTE of 72, effectively carrying extra personnel to mitigate for potential personnel availability issues. The difficulty that was expressed to the inspection team, is that Inverness is the only viable location within Highland LSO area that can provide the personnel who can be offered the opportunity for local temporary promotions. These can be used to cover deficiencies in watch based numbers, as well as in functional roles such as training and on the Community Safety Engagement Team (CSE) etc. Clearly ensuring any gaps in these roles are closed is important, and the opportunity for development in temporary promotion roles is welcomed by personnel at Inverness. However, most temporary promotions inevitably lead to a reduction of a firefighter on a watch as act up chains are populated. Perversely this leads to crewing deficiencies, even when as previously described, the FTE is in a positive position.

Recommendation 6



The Service should consider how best to plan for any reduction in FTE in geographically isolated stations such as Inverness when personnel are drafted in to fill temporary vacancies.

74. Across the NSDA there was a commonly held belief within the On Call personnel group that the work hours available were not enough to effectively manage the overall level of work that was expected by the Service. Stations have a weekly training night attendance of three hours. During this time the main focus for all of the personnel that we spoke with was to ensure that the TFoC framework modules were being completed. TFoC is the system around which the NSDA On Call staff build their station routines and it takes primacy above all others. There is a strong and commendable focus to ensure that firefighters, and in particular trainees, are up to date with the competence requirements for the operational element

of the job. Given that there are three hours available for each station to use per week, time is at a premium and these hours are regularly supplemented by additional hours being utilised by personnel across the week. These hours may be used when On Call personnel are available to conduct HFSVs, compile OI reports, attend additional training sessions, conduct equipment checks, and carry out station maintenance routines etc. The necessity to utilise additional hours to fulfil the basic functions of any fire station indicates that there are not enough hours that are made formally available to the On Call in the first instance. It should also be noted that On Call WCs and their FDOs had not encountered any issue accessing additional required hours when they are needed, which were always within the overall personnel budgets available.

75. We concluded that the On Call stations operate with many of the same expectations of a WT station but with limited time available to complete them. We did not encounter any cause for concern within the On Call personnel group at completing the work requirements, but there was frustration that some work such as email volume takes up, in relative terms, a significant portion of time available. In particular we received frequent comments on the time taken to complete training modules on topics such as cyber security and data protection etc. These issues are clearly important, but measured against the time that is available, appear to some to be of less significance than training for core practical skills which there is already limited time to practice.

76. On visiting mixed WT and On Call stations we could observe and hear of positive benefits that were gained through sharing the premises. When visiting Elgin, it was clear that the WT and the On Call teams mutually facilitate the work of either group. The WT at Elgin have several competences, including water rescue, which require significant training time for the personnel to maintain. In normal circumstances accessing time away from the station to undertake the required training would be problematic. However, with the On Call crew available for operational duties this pressure was alleviated. On the other hand, much of the station work routines can be undertaken by the WT thus freeing up valuable time for the On Call to focus as much as possible on their

TFoC etc. In geographical terms we found that Elgin offers the potential for a central hub (the WT station) to support, and be supported by, the surrounding On Call stations as well as the On Call crew from their home station. With the range of specialisms that the WT are required to remain competent in, the surrounding On Call stations access a more complete operational response during incidents on their station ground.

Availability

77. The Service monitors the availability of On Call appliances electronically. On Call personnel individually use the Gartan system to manage their own availability. Gartan is a recent introduction to the NSDA, and it was universally welcomed by the On Call personnel that we interviewed, who commented that it has added a level of control and oversight to availability that was not present before. At a number of On Call fire stations, personnel also informally and collectively manage their personal availability, to ensure that an appliance remains available. Once the number of personnel available falls below the minimum number, with the correct skill set required to crew an appliance, it will be deemed unavailable and as such would not be mobilised to an incident. In these circumstances the next nearest available appliance would be mobilised. In common with the East and West SDA, availability is usually higher during the evening and weekend hours. There are a number of factors that influence this, but primarily it is due to a high proportion of On Call firefighters' primary employment not being located within the allowable five-minute travel time of their station.
78. There were a number of notable On Call stations where the maintenance of appliance availability was commendably high, however there were a number that had low levels of availability across the week. The average availability of On Call appliances across the NSDA for 2023-24 was 77%.
79. There are a number of factors which can influence On Call availability, particularly in the more remote areas of the NSDA. Reasons cited to the inspection team included a lack of available employment opportunities locally in some areas, in some instances the age demographic of the local population and, in the case of a number of stations, a lack of population in terms of numbers who may be available to take up the role of operational firefighters. On Call RDS firefighters are required to commit to a 120 hours per week contract, which is also commonly referred to as a 100% contract. At the time of writing this report, the only variation to contract length that would be formally endorsed by the Service was for 90 hours, also referred to as a 75% contract. During our interviews within the NSDA when we asked what possible solutions could help alleviate the availability issue, we were consistently told that the minimum length of contract at 75% was an inhibitory factor to entry to the Service. We were given several examples of locally employed people who had indicated that they could be available during the 9 to 5 daytime employment hours, which are often hours that are difficult to cover for the SFRS On Call cadre, but who could not fulfil the 75% contract. The 75% contract has long been an employment contract issue and is clearly, based on the SDA inspections to date, an inhibitor to accessibility into the Service for a number of different groups who could perform the firefighter role. HMFSI note that the SFRS, during the period of this inspection's fieldwork, and in consequence of changes to UK national conditions of service, has produced a proposal that allows for a much greater degree of flexibility for On Call contract length. This proposal has undergone consultation with representative bodies and the firefighters themselves and has been formally accepted. This development is welcomed and should go some way to laying the ground conditions for greater accessibility to the On Call firefighter role, which it is hoped in turn will have a positive impact on appliance availability.
80. We were given details of several pilot initiatives that are underway in the NSDA as the Service seeks to maintain an appropriate operational response to emergency calls. These include the use of bank hours to place firefighters at strategic locations where there may be a short term crewing deficiency. A crew member would locate themselves within the station and undertake meaningful work, forming part of the fire crew in the event of an operational call. Bank hours are effective in making a fire station operationally available, particularly when it sits within a cluster of other stations that are deficient of crew. Locally however

there are frustrations that attempts to widen the use of the bank hours approach in the NSDA have met with a perceived lack of pace in SFRS governance arrangements. The view of some within the NSDA was that bank hours needed to form part of a broader approach to addressing On Call availability issues and that this should be wrapped up within the ongoing Strategic Service Review Programme (SSRP) and the recently implemented new On Call contract arrangements. On Call crews told us about the positive impact of using a mixed crew arrangement to ensure a functioning operational response, meaning a crew could be formed in the event of local stations being deficient in crew members and unavailable for fire calls as a result. Essentially two 'part crews' would mobilise from On Call stations, meet at a predetermined point, form a combined crew of sufficient numbers and skills and then travel to, and deal with, the operational incident. The mixed crewing model has achieved success in the NSDA, and the Service is seeking to widen its use out across the SDA. It should be noted that each joint mobilisation requires careful thought and input from NSDA OC colleagues, and their role in its success should not be understated. Although not yet in place, HMFSI was informed of an innovative proposal that is currently being considered to form fire appliance crews from a range of emergency service providers in remote areas where the population demographics make it difficult for consistent appliance availability to be achieved. This arrangement would require personnel from these partners to be suitably trained and equipped by the SFRS before they could be considered an effective part of an On Call crew who could assist with operational incidents.

81. The individuals fulfilling the role of the OCSWC across the NSDA play a significant role in ensuring On Call appliances remain available. Primarily this is achieved through these officers locating themselves at a station that requires an additional appliance crew member, thus making up the complement required to attend operational incidents. There were many examples of this across the NSDA. However, it was also noted that this could entail significant periods of the working day moving to or between stations as the need for an additional crew member becomes known. As well as increasing road risk through significant travel distances being undertaken, a resultant economic cost for travel time and fuel costs should also be considered. It is our view that a number of other tasks that could add value can become less of a focus through a lack of available time or agency. OCSWCs across the SFRS add great value in their many and varied roles. When a significant part of their function is to fulfil the role of a peripatetic appliance crew member, then the impact that they can bring to other work is diluted and diminished. Our investigations in the East, West and North SDAs have shown that the OCSWCs are most effective when they are free to focus on recruitment, organising or contributing towards training, organising or collating OI, organising or helping to deliver community safety initiative outcomes etc. While remaining available to perform the role of a crew member of an On Call appliance, particularly at a strategic location amongst a group of low availability stations is important, it is our view that a WC need not perform this. Over recent years across the SFRS the introduction of the OCSWC role has proven that appropriately skilled and motivated personnel can move into unique support roles. HMFSI advocates the consideration of an On Call Support Firefighter role to assist the OCSWCs and to bolster the peripatetic cadre who could be made available to support appliance availability. Much of the valuable support work that is currently undertaken by the OCSWC could also be undertaken by individuals at firefighter level. The main assumed benefits from this change would be a freeing up of capacity for the OCSWC to focus on other more impactful work such as On Call recruitment.

Recommendation 7



The Service should continue to explore and use innovative approaches to ensure the availability of On Call operational responses and should consider the merits of these innovations and actively seek to use current governance processes to facilitate them.

Recommendation 8

The SFRS should continue to develop its successful use of On Call Support personnel. The use of this approach could be considered for extension to other roles such as Crew Commander and firefighter, who could perform elements of work currently undertaken by OCSWCs, thus freeing them up for more impactful management-focused work.

NSDA Estate

82. The SFRS published a Strategic Asset Management Plan (SAMPP): Property 2023-28 which sets out its aim to provide a modern fit for purpose fire and rescue service estate. The SAMPP highlighted many issues that resonate with the findings from our inspection investigations including a lack of dignified toilet facilities, a lack of appropriate facilities to enable post incident decontamination to be undertaken by operational personnel, a lack of storage and drying facilities for operational PPE etc.

83. The Service has also had a Property Condition Survey carried out on all fire stations in the NSDA which has attributed a score to each. The surveys give Service managers information regarding the assessed condition of the fabric and services of the building. A Corporate Landlord model details each stations rating regarding Condition and Suitability. With regards to Condition and scoring, out of 165 Fire Stations, the NSDA had no stations scored as being in good condition, 67.5% were in satisfactory condition, 30% were in poor condition and 2.5% were in bad condition. With regard to Suitability, 6.1% were good, 4.3% were satisfactory, 57.7% were poor and 31.9% were bad. This information can be used by property managers within Assets to prioritise future station improvement works.

84. Both the SAMPP and the Property Condition Surveys that have been undertaken need to be considered in the context of the current SFRS risk based 5 Year Capital Programme that includes Property, as well as Fleet and Equipment. The Service faces significant funding challenges to maintain standards at existing levels and to ensure that its estate is fit for purpose and can contribute to the central mission of enabling its operational assets to mobilise from, and return to, suitable and sufficient premises that can underpin and enable the wellbeing of its personnel.

85. This risk-based approach has the rebuild or refurbishment of those fire stations affected by Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC), which HMFSI has reported upon in the recent East and West SDA reports, as a top priority. This would of course include those located within the NSDA. While we acknowledge the competing demands for resources within the SFRS, and agree that a balance needs to be struck between the provision of a quality estate as well as fleet and equipment, we are also cognisant of the health surveillance exercise relating to firefighter exposure to fire contaminants that is underway and due to report its findings. With this in mind, and notwithstanding the necessary project planning and lead in times for estate works, having observed the current lack of preparedness to meet the contaminants challenge within the Services' fire stations, we would urge a flexible approach to future property upgrade planning. During our site visits we observed the decontamination system that has been installed and is successfully running in Inverness fire station and offers an insight into what is possible when tackling the issue of firefighter decontamination post incident. We also note and welcome the opening of new facilities at Dingwall Fire Station and the long term strategy plans as advised to us by SFRS to address this issue more generally.

86. While much of the NSDA estate was considered by its personnel to be in satisfactory condition and the staff who operated from these premises were content with them, this was not the case with a significant number of other sites. When considering fire stations, the overall suitability

of those premises in the NSDA was scored as being either poor or bad on 90% of occasions. Specific property feedback that we received from NSDA staff included:

- A lack of dignified facilities, particularly for female personnel
- A lack of appropriate storage for operational PPE
- A lack of separation between appliance bays and PPE storage in On Call stations
- A lack of showers and other infrastructure necessary for post incident decontamination
- Instances of poor broadband connectivity within a number of stations
- Insufficient numbers of computer terminals for personnel to undertake and mark up training
- Limited storage and recharging facilities for BA cylinders.

87. During our fieldwork we were informed that the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) had placed an improvement notice on three WIOS stations that lack basic facilities such as running water or toilet facilities. The issues leading to this action have been known about for many years and the NSDA has proposed solutions to them without a resolution being achieved. At this time, we understand that these affected stations require to be redesignated as 'garages', that they have been provided with portable toilet facilities and any post incident decontamination etc. must be undertaken at the most suitable neighbouring stations that could be some distance away. In WIOS there are a significant number of fire stations that lack many of the basic features. The lack of dignified facilities in stations was commented on as being a barrier to entry to the Service by females in particular, for whom a number of stations have no designated toilet or shower facilities.

88. The NSDA, like the East and West SDAs, has several fire stations that have RAAC incorporated into their structures. Across the SFRS remedial actions have been considered and temporary structural support solutions introduced to mitigate the probability of fire station structures failing. These temporary solutions have now been in place for a

considerable length of time. Through our engagement with the Service on this subject, we understand that a full resolution to RAAC affected fire stations is the top priority for the Property team within Assets, and that a medium term series of major renovations is planned and scheduled to resolve them. We agree with the Service that resolving RAAC issues within its property estate is important and would urge that it be done as soon as is practicable, within the budgetary constraints.

89. We acknowledge that change and improvement to the scale required across the NSDA, and indeed across the entire property estate, will require significant capital investment. We also acknowledge that the SFRS cannot achieve such improvement without appropriate funding being provided by the Scottish Government in annual budget allocation. Whilst we are pleased to note that capital funding provided to the SFRS rose significantly in 2024/25 and 2025/26 budgets, the level of improvement and upgrade required to address this issue will depend on sustained investment over a longer period of time.

90. A source of frustration for many in the NSDA, including station based personnel and senior managers in the Areas, was a widespread belief that it takes too long for property repairs and upgrades to be completed. There appears to be a lack of informative communication between property and the sites regarding works that are planned. Many report that they enjoy good personal relationships with their property managers, but do not feel informed and cannot understand the process for selecting which work is undertaken as a priority. A common example cited in this regard was the fitting of fire doors throughout a number of fire stations in the NSDA, and across a number of other sites in the Service estate. Personnel in stations often felt that more pressing property issues should be dealt with as a matter of priority, rather than the fitting of these high quality doors throughout stations. During our site visits we noted on a number of occasions that 60 minute fire doors were fitted, doubtless at significant cost, in locations where they were not required. We would regularly receive comments regarding fire door installation taking precedence over solving deficiencies at stations such as adequate showers and toilets. While

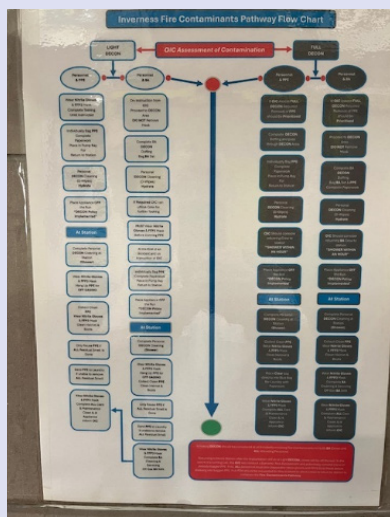
we acknowledge it is for the SFRS to make informed decisions about what works should be undertaken at its sites, there is a need for the informed decision-making processes to be communicated to its staff groups. We note from our fieldwork interviews that there is a feeling within the SFRS Assets team that the many excellent examples of work that they do undertake often goes unreported and is often unknown to the wider Service staff groups. We were informed that it is the intention of Assets to begin to produce a regular newsletter to “inform and celebrate” the work that is done in providing suitable appliances, equipment and places to work within the SFRS.

Recommendation 9

The SFRS Assets Team should consider and introduce a communications and engagement process that ensures that staff at SDA, LSO and station level are informed of property upgrade works that are planned or are in progress.

Case Study – A Contaminants Ready Fire Station: Inverness

91. The SFRS is taking steps to fully understand the condition of its operational stations in relation to the work that will be required to have them individually zoned and equipped to provide a suitable post incident decontamination environment. While this is welcome, there are significant challenges within the NSDA stations estate that will need to be overcome. Many stations within the SDA do not have the basic requirements of toilets or showers that are required to affect personnel decontamination processes. This issue and the scale of the challenge facing the Service is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the example of WIOS where, during a recent SFRS wide fire station survey, 25 of the 40 stations on the islands could not be properly designated for decontamination purposes. From these survey results it is clear that significant station infrastructure upgrades will be required across the NSDA to allow appropriate decontamination to be undertaken post operational incident.
92. During our fieldwork we visited Inverness Fire Station and were able to see what is possible in terms of integrating a decontamination strategy into a building's infrastructure. The premises was set to undergo renovations and the plans, as we understand it were well advanced for the new layout, but did not include a focus on the infrastructure to support post incident decontamination. The LSO management team, in concert with the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), were able to achieve changes to the design specifications. What we viewed at Inverness was in short, a model for the future of firefighter decontamination.
93. The timing of the fire station renovation was perhaps fortunate, but without the foresight of the partnership approach between the LSO team and the FBU a valuable opportunity may have been lost. It is somewhat disappointing that before this partnership took a keen interest in the renovation works that decontamination infrastructure had not been considered a priority for the project. It is also worth noting that while significant levels of cash resource were directed towards this project, it offers insights into how, with relatively minor works such as strategically placed access points for showers, appropriate signage and access door furniture, that much can be achieved.
94. The station itself now has external BA cleaning stations, hanging racks for contaminated PPE, laundry bins in the outside area for bagged contaminated PPE, external doors to dedicated shower cubicles, dedicated locker space for all personnel (each with a grab bag for clean station wear kit placed within them), and dedicated exit points from the decontamination showering area back into the body of the station. This whole system works in a logical flow and signage indicating directions is prominently placed for easy viewing by personnel. These dedicated facilities are placed within a small station extension but could in our opinion be replicated within existing stations without recourse to wholesale rebuild works.



Case Study – A Contaminants Ready Fire Station: Inverness Continued

95. The new facilities and systems at Inverness have been well received by the operational staff who operate from there. They told us that they have made the cultural changes in attitude to decontamination that are required, as well as the supporting infrastructure, to make the system a success. The staff on site were well informed and engaged about the outcomes that the project set out to achieve. This can be summed up with the comment “the contaminants developments are really positive, and we feel positive about the set up”, demonstrating how staff have fully bought into the change. The SFRS formally reopened Dingwall Fire Station, which also has new decontamination infrastructure built into the station fabric, in November 2024.

Good Practice 5



The introduction of fire stations that have decontamination infrastructure fully integrated into their fabric is a positive step forward for the SFRS. These new facilities have been well received by the personnel who utilise them.

NSDA Appliances

96. In 2022 the Service published the Strategic Asset Management Plan: Fleet 2022-27 (SAMPF), which sets out how the SFRS aims to provide a fit for purpose fleet for the provision of services across the whole organisation. The SFRS's national Fleet Function manages the procurement and servicing of vehicles used across the Service including the NSDA, allocating and replacing vehicles based on a national policy. The SAMPF and its aspirations need to be considered in the context of the current SFRS risk based 5 Year Capital Programme that includes Fleet, as well as Property and Equipment. The Service faces significant funding challenges impacting on its ability to ensure that its fleet of vehicles remains fit for purpose. These vehicles contribute to the central mission of enabling SFRS to mobilise to emergency events, carrying appropriate numbers of crew, and carrying suitable equipment to deal with the wide range of operational incidents it attends.

97. The appliances that operate across the NSDA are of varying age, but the crews in stations were generally content with their

fire appliances, and this was reflected in the generally good condition that we found them in. When a fire stations appliances are made unavailable through servicing schedule requirements or for other maintenance to be carried out, a replacement vehicle is made available for use. These vehicles are known as 'spare fleet appliances' and can be of varying model types and age. A consistent observation that was made to us concerned some very aged spare fleet appliances, many of which often fail their basic checks carried out at fire stations before being placed on the run. Common issues, aside from the age of the spare fleet, were that the lockers of these vehicles were not pegged out to carry a full complement of operational equipment, which meant that equipment was often left stored in stations; they often would arrive without hose reel tubing, or in some instances they would be fitted with non-standard hose reel connections. We raised the issue of the spare fleet, some of it more than twenty years old in age, with Assets. It was acknowledged by Assets that the age and condition of spare appliances was not at the levels that the Service is content with. We were informed that extra resource has been

allocated within this financial year to purchase twenty new fire appliances and that this would enable less aged appliances to be placed into the spare fleet. The intention is to tackle the issue over time, although Assets could not confirm how many, if any, of these new additions to the spare fleet would be allocated to the NSDA.

Recommendation 10



Assets should review the age and condition of its spare appliance fleet and make provision to reduce and improve it as new vehicles enter service making less aged appliances available.

98. Servicing and maintenance of SFRS vehicles is undertaken at centralised Asset Resource Centres (ARC) across Scotland. The ARCs for the NSDA are located in Dundee and Inverness. We enquired about the possible use of private garage facilities for this purpose, but the Service has carried out comparative cost analysis and the maintenance of its own dedicated workshops within regional ARCs has shown to be the most cost-effective solution. The SFRS does have in place some limited maintenance contracts for its vehicles in particularly remote areas of Scotland including some locations within the NSDA. These contracts would include arrangements for the replacement of vehicle tyres etc which is more cost effective in these circumstances. However, we found examples of remote stations where minor modifications to vehicles had been carried out outwith the SFRS contractual arrangements. An example of such a modification was fire appliance lockers bays being pegged out in a bespoke fashion to accommodate equipment. On reviewing this work, we concluded that it had been done to a high standard of quality and that it provided a good solution for securing operational equipment within the vehicle lockers. As we understand it, this work was carried out with no cost recharge to the Service and that it did not form part of a formal contract. The auto garage that carried out the work is owned by an On Call member of staff and the station did not want to have their fire appliance taken off island for an extended period of time to have the necessary work carried out as this would entail having an inevitably aged,

and potentially less reliable, replacement vehicle made available to them. This example demonstrated a resilience and self-reliance to seek solutions to their issues to maintain service. It did also however indicate that some minor works may be possible at remote locations without the need to change over station appliances and have them out of use for potentially extended periods of time.

Recommendation 11



The SFRS should conduct a review of fleet maintenance options and consider if added value and cost savings can be made. They should consider any added benefits that could be achieved through delivering a minor repairs service via local garage establishments in remote and island locations.

99. In common with the West SDA report, our fieldwork came across an example of a Special Operations Response Unit that had been brought into service as a Command Support Unit (CSU). Having viewed the vehicle and compared it to the ideal capabilities of a dedicated CSU, it is understandable that the operational crews who may have to use it at incidents expressed concerns about its suitability. Having raised the issue with Assets we understand that new CSU vehicles have been ordered and are awaiting delivery into the Service. These will be a welcome addition to the operational fleet.

Recommendation 12



A Command Support Unit is a critical appliance for the successful management of operational incidents. The current arrangements for temporary CSUs are unsuitable and the new units should be brought into service as soon as is practicable.

100. Service personnel operate across long travel distances in the NSDA. Like many businesses, the SFRS is in the process of reducing its carbon footprint and the emissions it produces. In doing so it has begun to replace its light vehicle, 'white fleet' combustion engine vehicles with Electric Vehicles (EV) along with the recharging infrastructure that is necessary to keep these cars and vans appropriately charged. However, it was widely reported to the inspection team that there were several issues related to the use of EV that were a cause of some concern.
101. Following operational incidents there may be a need for station personnel to access spare stocks of PPE that is kept at strategic holding stations. These stations can be over 50 miles away from some stations that generate the need for the PPE, and they may need to be accessed at any time of the day. It is our understanding that most stations do not have access to a light vehicle and there is a need to make these journeys either in their own private cars, as was widely reported to us, or in an operational fire appliance. Both options carry risk and/or financial cost for individuals or the Service.
102. It is widely accepted that range anxiety related to EV is a genuine cause for concern for drivers. We spoke with a number of personnel who work in support functions within the Service. Many of them use EV to go about their business or to access locations that are remote from their place of work. Many of them told us that it is a cause for concern that the range of EV vehicles may not be sufficient for their travel to undertake work activities, but also that the necessary charging infrastructure to support the effective use of these vehicles may not yet be sufficiently in place across the North of Scotland. As we understand it, representations have been made to Assets to relay these concerns, and they are currently under consideration.

Recommendation 13



The SFRS should review the effectiveness of EV in more remote areas of Scotland. They should consider the charging infrastructure that is necessary to support the use of these vehicles, and local access to charging facilities when they are not located on Service premises. Where necessary, to ensure operational readiness, combustion engine vehicles should be strategically placed for use by SFRS personnel.

NSDA Equipment

103. In 2023, the Service published the Strategic Asset Management Plan (SAMPE): Equipment 2023-28, which sets out how it aims to provide the wide range of equipment, kit and PPE that is necessary for the provision of services across the whole organisation. The SFRS's national Equipment Function manages the procurement, servicing and repair of equipment used across the SFRS including the NSDA, allocating and replacing it based on a national policy. The SAMPE and its aspirations need to be considered in the context of the SFRS risk-based 5 Year Capital Programme that includes Equipment, as well as Property and Fleet. The Service faces significant funding challenges to ensure that the equipment, kit and PPE it procures and purchases is fit for purpose, and can contribute to the central mission of enabling its operational assets to mobilise and deal with a wide range of emergency incidents.

104. As with the inspections in the East and West SDAs, we found common themes relating to equipment and its testing, repair and servicing. These include a centralised approach to equipment repair; a predominantly paper-based system for the recording of equipment checks at fire stations; the introduction of new fire ground radios which have been well received; the ability to deviate, particularly for On Call stations, from a standard equipment inventory for Service appliances; repeated requests for consideration for the issuing of breaking in and power tools (such as a reciprocating saw) with little or no feedback communications from Assets. It is not our intention to go through these issues again in detail in this section; instead they are considered holistically within the In Focus: Assets section.
105. When we asked operational crews for their views on the availability for use and the standard of their equipment, they were, subject to the above requests, generally content with it. We received many comments that the standard and breadth of the equipment provided was better in many ways than that which was provided by legacy Services before the formation of the SFRS in 2013.
106. There are specialist rescue capabilities, such as water and rope rescue, based at a number of stations within the NSDA. The disposition of these resources is decided nationally and designed to give communities across Scotland equitable access. Some of the capability, such as USAR, DIM and Mass Decontamination was introduced across the UK following the September 11th terrorist attacks of 2001. Some of the appliances and equipment introduced at that time was commented upon to be at the end of its useful operational life due to wear and tear.
107. Operational staff across the NSDA provided very positive comments and feedback on the standard of structural firefighting PPE that they are issued with. We found that PPE records were in the main marked up and that they reflected the use of the laundry system that is in place across the SFRS. Where we found instances of PPE records not to be marked up to a standard that the Service would expect, we provided feedback at the time for supervisory officers. While many stations had suitable storage capacity for PPE, this was not always the case. There were many instances of fire stations that had a lack of storage capacity for PPE, and in many On Call stations a lack of separation between PPE storage and station appliance bays and vehicles. Clearly this exposes PPE to vehicle fumes and contamination particulates. We expect that this issue will be further considered by the SFRS as it seeks to provide effective control of contaminants within its fire stations. Operational staff that we talked to have a good awareness of contaminants and a desire to do what they could to adhere to Service guidance, such as it is at the time of writing this report, to mitigate the impacts of it upon themselves and their colleagues. Our findings as they relate to contaminants are set out in the case study 'A Contaminants Ready Fire Station: Inverness' within this report.
108. The NSDA covers an area that has been impacted in recent years by protracted wildfire incidents. The SFRS has invested recently in new appliances, kit and equipment to ensure that it is prepared to meet this growing challenge that is linked to climate change. While suitable wildfire PPE has been provided for personnel in key located stations across the SFRS, including the NSDA, we received many comments from personnel whose stations sit adjacent to wildfire risk areas, and from where they are frequently mobilised to assist in tackling these types of incidents. While acknowledging the qualities of their structural fire PPE, personnel note that it is unsuitable for conducting firefighting operations related to wildfires. Using this type of PPE at these incidents can lead to very uncomfortable working conditions for firefighters who relayed to us many instances of overheating. Personnel were also keen to emphasise the impractical nature of standard fire boots for traversing the rough terrain of hills and forested areas. These comments resonate with those that are set out within HMFSI recent thematic report 'Climate Change: managing the operational impact on fires and other weather related emergencies 2023', as well as the recent East and West SDA reports. The crews who made these comments reported to us that they could be deployed to these wildfire incidents on a continuous rolling basis over a period of

Personal Protective Equipment

107. Operational staff across the NSDA provided very positive comments and feedback on the standard of structural firefighting PPE that they are issued with. We found that PPE records were in the main marked up and that they reflected the use of the laundry system that is in place across the SFRS. Where we found instances of PPE records not to be marked up to a standard that the Service would expect, we provided feedback at the time

several days. To do so in PPE that they did not consider to be practical for the task was a source of frustration for them. As we have commented above, the SFRS has planned for future wildfire events by pre-positioning kit and equipment at stations. To help underpin the best and most comfortable working conditions for personnel who may attend wildfire incidents, but who do not have a personal issue of the PPE that the Service considers to be most appropriate for that risk, we would urge consideration of the establishment of transportable stocks of wildfire PPE for their use and then return post-deployment.

Recommendation 14



The Service should review the suitability of PPE for personnel who are not from designated wildfire stations, but who are known to provide significant capacity in any response to these incidents. Currently firefighters can access strategic stocks of spare PPE; if necessary, the SFRS should follow a similar route to ensure that personnel who are mobilised to these incidents are dressed to the same standard as their designated station colleagues.

109. In line with the East and West SDA reports, we again received a number of comments regarding the station wear uniform which is issued to SFRS personnel, and which was considered to be of poor quality when compared to that of several years ago.

110. The laundering system for firefighting PPE is a topic that was raised on every visit to operational sites in the NSDA, in this regard there was a consistency of comment across all three SDAs of the Service. Rather than simply reiterate these comments, it was considered appropriate to consider laundry among several other Assets focused topics that we covered during our fieldwork interviews. Laundry of PPE is therefore addressed within the 'In Focus: Assets' section in this report.

In Focus: Assets

111. The working relationship between the SFRS Assets team and the operational element of the SDAs elicited much debate and conversation during inspection interviews. It should be stated here that many officers and station based personnel were complimentary about the work that the wider Assets team performs and about the quality of fire appliances, kit, equipment and PPE that they supply and maintain. Many NSDA staff reported that "the kit we have now is better than what we had before the SFRS". HMFSI is clear that the contributions of Assets have a positive impact and adds value to the operational response of the SFRS. However, we were also informed of many instances of frustration by NSDA personnel with the way that they perceive Assets to operate and deliver its services.

112. Assets were clear that their primary role is to enable the frontline capabilities of the SFRS to be brought to bear when and where they are needed. We were told, "at the end of the day we are here to enable the frontline in all its capabilities. We provide what is requested." and that this is done by "providing the best vehicle fleet, kit, equipment etc.". In doing so they contribute towards the mission of the Service. However, there are several topics that regularly come up during interviews that are a cause for concern for many that the Inspectorate speak to. The HMFSI inspection team took note of these issues and returned to the Service to discuss them with senior managers within Assets. In doing so we have made a qualitative assessment of the full spectrum of information available and make observations that we believe are balanced.

113. Senior Assets team members were clear that the issue, replacement or repair of PPE, kit or equipment was not driven at any time by budget. If essential items required to be replaced, then they would be provided as soon as possible when taking into consideration any supply considerations. They did however concede that their team was small and possibly not big enough for the very high demand on their services, i.e. "we don't sit on repairs (or replacements), but we do have issues with a fairly small team with finite capacity managing the work". At the time of interview, we were informed that the Assets team was to be bolstered by four new WCs

who would focus on operational specialisms and the kit and equipment that is required for these. The hope is that this will lead to quicker response times and alleviate some of the work volume pressures on the small team who currently deal with these.

114. There was a perception among many station based firefighters that equipment can take excessive periods of time to be returned from their local Assets Resource Centre (ARC). Some believed this has had a tangible negative outcome at operational incidents. When the inspection team sought further details about these instances, there was often no recorded details that could be added to the context of the discussion. There were a number of instances of WCs and FDOs who have had to follow up on reasons as to why kit and equipment had not been returned from an ARC to stations as promptly as would have been hoped. On doing so, they were informed of various reasons for these delays, including extended lead time for parts and spares to be made from equipment suppliers. We discussed several specific issues with Assets regarding equipment repair or replacement. We raised the issue of an extended delay of several months to replace hose for a fire appliances' Ultra High Pressure Lance (UHPL). It was clear that Assets knew the details of the specific issue and were able to offer an explanation that these were not stock held items for the SFRS or indeed for the UK distributor/ manufacturer. Assets placed a special order for the hose, which had a circa eight-week delivery time, and purchased a replacement length and an additional stock length to try to ensure it was not an issue in future. Another issue raised was in regard to a station that had two attack branches away for repair for extended periods of time. This issue was not specifically known about by Assets, but there was a belief that it should have been captured, and replacement branches should have been issued. In both examples there appears to have been an underlying lack of communication from Assets to the station personnel in question, but also a failure of personnel to press for an explanation as to why equipment was unavailable for the extended periods of time. We believe that many of the issues relating to Assets that were

relayed to us during our NSDA fieldwork could be resolved by a more robust communications and engagement process between the Directorate and the SDAs.

Recommendation 15



Assets should consider the process for the repair or replacement of kit and equipment and introduce a system that gives regular feedback to station based personnel regarding the progress or any delays in the repair or replacement of kit and equipment.

115. There was a perception amongst operational personnel in the NSDA that Assets had been responsible for the curtailment of realistic swift water rescue training using boats with outboard engines. Crews commented that they wanted to exercise on a challenging stretch of water and that this had caused damage to engine prop protection cages. Crews were of the opinion that the cages had done the job that they were designed for and that a stretch of water that has been the scene of incidents previously was able to be used for training. However, on discussing this with Assets they informed us that a significant number of prop guards had been damaged during a short period of time, that this had led to significant expense to repair engine damage to outboard motors and this in turn led to several boats being placed off the run and unable to respond to operational incidents. On hearing of a reduction in availability of these critical water rescue assets, principal officers enquired into the reasons for this and were informed of the situation. The Service came to the decision to protect the integrity of the boats in an effort to maintain their availability for deployment to operational incidents. Based on this, personnel in NSDA stations were asked to consider other bodies of water for training events for water rescue. It is the view of HMFSI that this was proportionate as there needs to be a balance between the value of live training on water and the potential financial costs of this, as well as the risk of putting boats off the run. Again however, a more effective communications

and engagement approach from the Assets team may have led to a greater level of understanding about the situation.

116. During our In Focus discussions, we were informed that Assets is in the process of producing a quarterly newsletter which will deliver news on property, fleet and equipment. The draft of the first one is complete and is due for release with the aim of informing staff of updates, new policy and procedure, ongoing works, new appliances and equipment that is being introduced to the Service as well as a range of other good news. This is a welcome development and should ensure greater engagement with the SDAs and their operational stations.

Recommendation 16



While we acknowledge the development of a newsletter by the Assets team, there is a need to actively engage with NSDA personnel on a range of matters. The Assets team should consider, and where necessary review its communications and engagement with the SDAs with a view to informing them of ongoing work and progress across a range of issues. Engagement should be systematic and inclusive to ensure station based issues are able to be resolved and that all partners are informed of progress.

117. SFRS appliances come fully equipped with a standard level of operational equipment to deal with a wide range of operational incidents. The equipment level can be guided by the size of the appliance if it is a traditional fire appliance, or if its station operates the On Call duty system. The equipment loads for RDS and Volunteer stations is normally less than that for WT stations which reflects the

reduced range of incidents that appliances at these stations are expected to mobilise to. There are of course exceptions to this and requests for an augmented level of appliance equipment can be made on a case by case basis. We were informed of an instance where a Volunteer station had been issued with a powered combi tool as it was a first call responder to the busy A9 road. While this piece of equipment was considered necessary and a business case for it being issued was accepted, another prepared business case was not progressed by Assets. A tirlor winch was requested after the same Volunteer unit was unable to carry out critical stabilisation at a live operational incident. Following this incident, a business case was prepared and endorsed by the LSO for said piece of equipment to be issued, but the request was refused. When this point was raised in our In Focus discussions with Assets it was not recognised as the request had been denied by another member of the team. Assets did however confirm that they would be content to consider evidenced requests for critical pieces of operational equipment to augment the standard issue of appliance kit.

Recommendation 17



Assets should consider and design a process for business case presentation for the issue of equipment on a case by case basis to the level of a WT station appliance. These cases should be reviewed at an appropriate level and the outcomes clearly communicated back to the SDA, LSO and fire station involved.

118. A regular topic of conversation across all three SDA inspections has been around structural fire PPE. The quality of this PPE was almost unanimously praised and often described as the best that firefighters had been issued with. There were however divided opinions upon the SFRS system for laundering of the PPE, particularly in light of the most recent thinking around mitigating the impact of dirty and

contaminated fire kit on the long term health of firefighters, and in accessing spare PPE where kit has been rendered unusable after wear. Many interviewees told us that the turnaround time for fire kit to be laundered and returned to them was reasonable and took around two weeks. There were many others however who reported that two to six weeks for return was common, and we also heard a number of reports where this time period had been considerably longer. Through our discussions with the Assets team we understand that a Service Level Agreement (SLA) is in place between the SFRS and a contractor that delivers specialist laundry services for firefighting PPE. All of the PPE laundry across Scotland is delivered to a site in the central belt with a stipulated seven day turnaround target. We were informed that the SLA meets its target of a 95% turnaround for the PPE.

119. Given that the SLA is within scope for the turnaround time of the laundry service, we considered any associated issues that may lead to delays in station based personnel experiencing delays in the return of their firefighting PPE. Through discussions about the processes that are involved in the preparation, collection and transportation to the laundry site of PPE and its subsequent return to its home stations, we believe that there are several identifiable systemic issues that could be addressed to improve the perception and performance of the system currently in place. There is only one pick up day per week from each fire station for laundry. Should personnel miss this day, through for example an incident occurring the following day that leads to PPE contamination, then a week is effectively added onto the process. The addition of extra pick up days for PPE laundry from stations would offer operational personnel more flexibility and save time in the overall laundry process. We also understand that the fresh laundry gets delivered to central holding stations from where it is distributed to the work location station of its owner. If there is a failure in collecting and redistributing this laundry, then further delays in returns of laundered PPE may be experienced. During the course of our fieldwork for the SDA reports we have witnessed large bags of laundered PPE at station distribution points. Any delay in the pickup of these items again adds time to its final return to owners. The arrangements
- for the transportation of laundered PPE back to its home station appears to have many variations including by van drivers specifically employed for these types of tasks, use of vans or cars belonging to OCSWCs across the NSDA (including between islands via ferry as needed), by utilising the Service vehicles of FDOs where they are going to stations that they are supervising etc. It seems that the transportation of laundered PPE back to its home station is ad hoc at best and not part of a clearly defined process. It should be noted that we are not criticising the can do, self-reliant approach of staff in the NSDA, quite the opposite. However the lack of a formalised transportation system for the purposes of moving laundered PPE, and it should be noted other items of consumables, kit and equipment which we viewed at a number of locations, adds to the time delays which are experienced by a significant number of operational personnel awaiting its return.
120. A lack of available firefighting PPE for personnel can lead to fire appliances becoming unavailable. Operational personnel across the SFRS have two sets of this PPE. We were told of regular occurrences of fire crews PPE being away for laundering only for their second set to then be exposed to contaminants at operational incidents. In instances such as these the SFRS has a number of 'holding stations', which have a stock of spare firefighting PPE that is available for short-term issue and loan to individuals, thus allowing them to be equipped to return to operational duty and their fire appliance to be available to attend further emergency calls. Access to spare kit within the NSDA can often mean extended journey times for the fire appliances and the crew who need it. It is common for 50-mile journeys to be undertaken which takes time to complete and extends the time that fire appliances may remain unavailable for emergency calls.

Recommendation 18

The Service should review the system for collection and return of firefighting PPE laundry. The aim should be to identify opportunities to reduce lost time within the end to end system and to make PPE available for use by operational fire crews as soon as possible. A communication and engagement process should be planned and undertaken to explain the full process to operational personnel.

121. In the recent past there have been issues surrounding the availability of suitably sized kit, and of enough spare kit being available. The SFRS recognised this problem and has invested significant capital funding to bolster the numbers of items available for spare PPE stock. Additionally, Assets took an empirical view of the workforce profile and has provided a suitable mix of sizes to try to ensure what is required at the point of need is available. Should a situation be reached where spare PPE stock is exhausted, it can be made available from central stocks that are held within ARCs. While a journey to an ARC may involve extended travel time, the availability of the required PPE is much more likely. The exception to this is at weekends or outwith normal opening times. In instances such as these there may be local arrangements for ARC managers to open the facility and issue what is required, but this is beyond employee regular terms and conditions and cannot be relied upon as being a fully robust solution to shortages. The Assets team have not made access to ARCs available to on duty FDOs as it seeks to maintain control over the issue of expensive PPE items.

Good Practice 6

Additional structural firefighting PPE stocks have been provided by the SFRS as a result of an identified need and following significant capital investment.

122. The Assets team, while being focused on providing their services, also stressed the importance of managing the expectations of operational response personnel across the SFRS. They are required to take a one Service approach to the provision of kit, equipment and PPE and told us “issues need to be addressed nationally, and we understand that this can cause local frustrations” if a particular need does not appear to be dealt with swiftly enough. Bringing new kit and equipment into service requires Assets to go through a recognised procurement process, place orders, potentially go through manufacturing processes, achieve delivery and to then train for use before placing it into operational service, all of which takes time. The Assets team offered assurance that they are focused on the primary mission to always do their best to support the frontline and ensure fire appliances can be mobilised to deal with emergencies.

123. Whilst we have made recommendations for improvement within this section of the report, we also acknowledge the genuine efforts of the Assets team and recognise their desire to improve and deliver the best service possible to end users.

Operations Control Dundee

124. One of the Service’s three Operations Control (OC) Centres is located in Dundee (DOC) within the NSDA. The DOC is responsible for answering NSDA emergency fire calls, making appropriate appliance mobilisations to deal with operational incidents, managing communications to and from the scene of any incident and for managing the coordination and effective utilisation of appliances for relief duties at these incidents. The role of any of the Service’s three OCs is critical to the effective and efficient management of any incident, they are the first point of contact with incidents and have a crucial role to play until they are safely concluded. As well as managing NSDA calls, the DOC can, when needed, take and manage calls originating from the East and West SDAs. The DOC sits within the Operations function, and as such the NSDA DACO has no management responsibility for this facility.
125. When emergency 999 calls are received at the DOC, appliances are dispatched to the scene of the incident using an IT-based mobilising system. The mobilising systems in use across the three Service OCs are aged,

are losing functionality and considered to be at end of life. This end of life status, whilst mobilisations are still made and calls are not lost, is a cause of concern for the DOC staff. At the time of writing this report, the SFRS has procured a new system, and it is expected to be installed and made operational within the next 18 months. While the installation process and training for the new platform will put strain on the OC teams, it is eagerly awaited and expected to provide a robust system for the coming years.

126. The DOC, in common with the other OCs, has a functional management system. OC FDOs have specific roles, and deliver their work outputs based on these, e.g. training, personnel etc. Our recent inspections have queried the effectiveness of the functional management approach for the OCs as it does not, unlike other SFRS stations and facilities, have a single nominated overall manager for a site. It was highlighted as a source of frustration for many of the personnel that we interviewed that they needed to go to several FDOs to deal with issues local to the DOC. The limitations of the current management system have been recognised, and there is an ongoing consultation to amend this to a new model. We understand that the proposed new management structure that the consultation process considers, was not subject to a wide set of views and opinions before it was devised and made public. This consultation exercise has been ongoing for 24 months. Proposal papers for the structure have also been making their way through the SFRS governance system, but again we understand that it has not made sufficient progress to allow it to be enacted. This protracted delay is a source of concern for personnel throughout the DOC as there are significant proposed changes to the make-up of watches and to the lines of FDO management responsibilities.

Recommendation 19



The SFRS should consider the best and most appropriate management structure to address the fundamental management oversight weaknesses of the OCs. Staff should be fully engaged and opinions considered. FDOs should be canvassed for best practice views that can be worked into any final proposal.

127. As we asked DOC personnel how they plan their work cycle it became clear that this is done on a watch basis only with no apparent overarching guidance. Some watches told us that the SCs will review work cycles that forecast activity on a seven-week basis, while also reflecting on the previous period to review watch performance. In effect this approach is similar to that found in many stations who use a seven-week planner for forecasting and planning future activity. The lack of a link to an overall OC guidance plan was confirmed to us. We also understand that an OC audit process, developed in line with the SFRS station audit process, has previously been produced but never implemented. DOC staff told us that areas of performance would be audited for quality assurance purposes, but that no site wide inspections or audits are conducted. HMFSI believe that there should be an OC site audit process for the SFRS, thus ensuring that a point in time assessment of the OCs can be made against agreed criteria.

Recommendation 20

The Service should design and introduce site-specific plans for the OCs, similar to fire station plans, which align to SFRS governance and planning frameworks. Alongside these plans, the OC function should have a workplace audit process designed and modelled on a station audit to allow a full review of the workplace and its processes. The outcomes of the audits should be reported back to the individual sites and any issues raised made the subject of an action/improvement plan.

128. It was clear during fieldwork that the watches within the DOC enjoy their work, and staff feel well supported by their Officers and local FDOs. We noted, not always in a way that is entirely positive for OC staff wellbeing, that the OC team has a culture where no matter the issue to be dealt with that “we just get on with it!”. It was also noted that staffing numbers within the DOC have recently improved, but we were told that there has often been requests for personnel to work overtime hours, fill in for extra shifts and for them to voluntarily take fewer or shortened breaks during work shifts. DOC personnel told us that, in the recent past, minimum crewing levels have at time been reached and worked through. Added to this has been the use of Orange days within the 5 Group Duty System to cover “the cold and flu season and the bonfire night period”, often with no consideration of the additional hours that personnel have been fulfilling via overtime etc.

129. With the ongoing considerations for the new OC management structure, as well as fluctuations in overall staffing numbers, there are a high number of personnel who are fulfilling temporary promotions, some for significant periods of time. This has led to those seeking promotion to become frustrated at what they perceive to be delays

in the processes that these would naturally entail. During our fieldwork we were informed by a number of individuals that news on a proposed Crew Commander process has been announced several months before, only for it to then remain unconfirmed for an extended period of time.

130. Traditionally there would be a close relationship between local SDA officers, who would be expected to liaise and work closely during operational incidents, and their colleagues within the OC. As set out previously, the DOC watches feel well supported within their workplace. They did however tell us of a feeling of detachment from the wider SFRS, not feeling as connected to it as they should be, and of feeling undervalued despite the discretionary effort they provide to ensure that the OC functions when staffing is at low or critical levels, as they have been in the recent past. Many DOC staff told us that it was noticeable how infrequently their role is addressed via corporate communications or in Operational Assurance (OA) debrief reports etc.

Recommendation 21

The SFRS should work to ensure that the DOC staff group are actively engaged and communicated with to build ever more positive working relationships.

131. Our West SDA inspection report highlighted the issue of SFRS policy and procedure being introduced but not being fully reflective of the OC function and how they may need to use it. In common with all of the operational sites that we visited in the NSDA, we asked the DOC team about their involvement with OA. It is clear that the OC has an administrative and governance function for OA, and for the collation of the resources that have attended an incident and who may be required to collate information via the Service OA13 pro forma. We found that the DOC diligently compiles OA13 information, but were told that, in common with many other of our interviewees in the NSDA, that they receive no replies back. The DOC has also, as with the other SFRS OCs that the inspection team has recently visited, devised a shadow process that allows them to compile incident

information and to host regular debriefs at watch level. Their approach to OA was the most consistent that we found in the NSDA, in that the operational incident information gets compiled, the watch gets debriefed, and learning is collated for capture on individuals PDR records. This is consistent with other OCs. While other operational colleagues do complete OA13 returns, this level of consistency is not as evident within stations. The DOC personnel also told us that when the SFRS OA team compile and host debrief events of significant incidents, that the role of the OC is often overlooked, even when they have undertaken a significant role in the incident. OA is currently the subject of an ongoing inspection by HMFSI, and the role of the OC team will be covered in more detail within the findings of this report.

132. The SFRS UFAS reduction strategies have led to mobilisations to these types of calls being down by over 50% across the country. This is positive and has achieved the intended policy outcomes. However, the UFAS call volume for the OCs remains significant, and this has been acknowledged by the Service. Indeed, we have been told that the time spent on these calls has increased as the call challenging process requires a number of questions to be asked and the answers to them considered before a definite decision to mobilise or not is taken. One curious outcome of the reduction in appliance mobilisations due to UFAS calls that was highlighted to us was the reduction in the time spent by OC firefighters managing emergency calls. It is a statistical fact that the number of operational calls has reduced over the years to date, with the UFAS reduction having a significant further impact upon these. While the OC managers acknowledged the positive outcomes of the UFAS reduction, there was a concern that skills erosion would have to be considered and planned for.
133. In common with other operational staff in the NSDA we found that the level of Service led leadership and management training that the officers of the DOC have accessed in recent years has been low. Preparation for promotion, and development following it, has in the main been via mentoring and development through contact with other DOC officers. While this is commendable, like their colleagues in other operational roles across the NSDA, it is important that the OC staff are able to access

a consistent development pathway. This topic is dealt with within the report and the recommendations proposed should equally apply to OC officers.

Impact of UFAS Reduction Policy in the NSDA

134. The introduction of the new UFAS Reduction Policy in July 2023 was referred to in our East and West SDA reports. It was however difficult to quantify the outcomes that it may have been achieving at the time of their publication. While conducting our inspection interviews, we consistently asked about the perceived impacts of the policy and the benefits that it may be releasing. Anecdotally it was widely reported to us that a significant drop in UFAS activity was being experienced across the NSDA. Where there were historic low levels of UFAS calls in more rural communities to sleeping risks such as care homes and hotels, there was no real difference reported to us. In these places UFAS had not been an ongoing generator of high levels of appliance mobilisations, and this remains the case. However, where stations had historically experienced relatively high levels of UFAS appliance mobilisations, personnel told us that they believed that drops of circa 50% were common, and in several instances for stations located close to the whisky industry facilities that these figures were circa 80%. We received data from the SFRS Business Intelligence & Data Services Team (BIDS) that allowed us to compare numbers of operational incidents and UFAS calls for the reporting years 2022/23 and 2023/24. These figures showed that UFAS calls accounted for 58% of incidents in 2022/23 and 50% in 2023/24 due to a reduction in the number of 3,434 of these incident types. Clearly this reduction, which in real terms equates to a 29% fall, is welcome. However, it did not fully explain the anecdotal but consistent information that we were receiving from operational personnel, who indicated a more substantial drop in UFAS mobilisations. To allow this to be better presented we requested full-year data from the BIDS team that would reflect the period that the UFAS Policy had become live, i.e. from July 2023 to the end of June 2024.

This data is presented in Table 1 below:

	2023-24 July to June	2022-23 July to June	Reduction in Numbers	Reduction %
Total Incidents	15,319	21,134	5,815	28%
False Alarms Incidents	7,414	12,159	4,745	39%
UFAS Calls	2,622	6,813	4,191	62%

Table 1

From the table we can see that for the NSDA, UFAS incidents accounted for 17% of incidents from July 2023 to the end of June 2024, and that this is down from 32% from July 2022 to end June 2023. The 62% reduction in NSDA UFAS incidents within this period demonstrates clearly that the change in strategy has achieved its objective.

135. There was a concern that the On Call duty personnel may experience a drop in income related to the reduced levels of UFAS calls that they attend following the new policy implementation. However, from the responses that we received to this question when it was put to On Call personnel, we can conclude that while there has been a drop in income for some, it was offset by them being able to remain at their primary employment and by mobilising to calls that were more likely to require an emergency response as opposed to an attendance at the scene of an alarm actuation. The Service in the NSDA has also made additional hours available for On Call personnel to conduct station or community safety work. It was recognised by WT and On Call staff that less time spent on UFAS calls meant more time is available for other important work such as training.

Operation of the Incident Command System in the NSDA

136. One of the benefits realised from the reform of the fire service in Scotland was equity of access to resources which includes the full range of specialist appliances that the SFRS can bring to bear at operational incidents via its Incident Command System (ICS). The SFRS has stations and appliances at strategic locations to meet the risk that is present across Scotland. This approach ensures that a suitable mix of appliances, and firefighters with the appropriate skills, can be mobilised

to meet foreseeable risk. On the mainland, the road network ensures that additional appliances can be mobilised and reach the locus of incidents even with extended run times. Functional officer roles can also be filled with relative ease on the mainland, again subject to travel times via the road network. Inevitably, for a variety of reasons, this is not the case on the island groups of WIOS. While personnel and appliances can be moved to these islands via aircraft and ferry shipping, this is subject to either scheduled timetables or the activation of MOUs to ensure that logistical moves can be undertaken. It is foreseeable that such moves would take time, and if inclement weather was a significant feature, as it often is on the island groups, these time delays could be significant.

137. While the level of operational activity across WIOS is low, the risk of not being able to populate the ICS with either additional appliances and/or functional officers is clearly known. In instances where additional resources cannot be mobilised in good time the SFRS carries a level of risk that it must either plan for, or accept. It is our view that this should be reflected in the ICS Policy and the associated Standard Operating Procedures, and there should be narrative that explains that functional roles may not be able to be filled at the point of operational contact with an incident.

Recommendation 22

The SFRS should consider how best to reflect the known reality of managing operational incidents using the ICS at remote locations or on islands across Scotland. This should be reflected in the ICS Policy text.

138. During the course of our fieldwork, we heard of several instances where emergency response partners mobilised to SFRS incidents and then self-deployed within what would be considered to be the cordon area. We understand that as well as details being passed to the OA team, that local discussions and an incident debrief with other service providers was held post incident, and that clarifications on roles and responsibilities from both parties were made. It is however a concern that these events continue to take place. We are of the view that the NSDA management team should engage with Service partners to make clear the legislative role of the SFRS and deliver some input regarding how the ICS should operate.

Recommendation 23

The NSDA should actively engage with its local emergency service partners and deliver input on the role of the SFRS at incidents. Partner roles and mutual support should also be clearly set out.

Planning for Risk

139. It was clear from talking with operational personnel across the NSDA that a number of large projects associated with the renewable energy sector were ongoing or in the planning stages. Amongst others they include multiple on and offshore wind farms, Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) sites and connection sites for the cabling system that brings the wind generated energy to a central locus. These projects are important for the country as it meets the climate challenge and the move towards net zero. We were struck by

the scale of some of these projects which will either generate renewable energy or form the infrastructure for its collection and onward distribution into the UK energy grid system. Local crews referred to some of these projects as having been classified as Critical National Infrastructure (CNI). It was interesting therefore that the crews for the local stations where these installations are located, or are planned to be located, have had little preparation or training to deal with any incidents that could potentially occur within them. We understand that the SFRS does get informed about these projects, but are not involved in any meaningful way in planning for the risks that they will present when they go live. Locally the NSDA has set up a team to consider the impact that these new sites could have upon their planning and preparedness to meet any new risks that are identified.

Recommendation 24

The SFRS should review its role within the resilience and response planning process for large scale energy renewable systems and similar which could present operational challenges for its crews in future. The Service should put in place a system that allows for the notification of new projects and appropriate processes that would enable the initiation of any response planning, training or future equipment that may be required to meet these challenges.

140. The NSDA is home to multiple Scotch whisky distilleries of varying size and scale. Whisky exports were valued at £5.4B in 2024 and formed 22% of all UK food and drink exports. Sites that produce and/or store whisky will have a number of regulatory requirements to fulfil to ensure that the site risks are controlled. NSDA operational staff will conduct regular visits to these locations for familiarisation

and exercising. During our interviews as we discussed training and planning for these sites, we were offered no specific details of arrangements that are likely to be in place to deal with operational incidents at them. Given the economic importance of them, we were surprised at the lack of forthcoming details of how planning arrangements could or would be enacted in the event of an incident at one of these numerous locations. As we discussed the regular engagement that the NSDA has with these sites, it was not clear to us that ownership of risk, relating to potentially not having suitable and full arrangements in place, had been fully set out for the various distillery owners. We believe that there is a need to set out these risks in plain language, including explaining the time that it could potentially take to get appropriate SFRS resources on site, in the event of any potential incident.

Recommendation 25



The SFRS should actively engage the owners of Whisky distilleries in the NSDA to discuss risk details and ownership in the event of an incident at their sites.

141. Scotland has many dock, port and marina sites of varying size, and many of these are located within the NSDA. The ships that frequent Scottish ports, including those within the NSDA, include large cruise liners that carry over 5,000 passengers and crew. We found a similar situation as was highlighted within the West report, i.e. that no ship firefighting training or courses have been delivered within the Service for a number of years. Despite the inevitable erosion of skills and reduction in capacity this will have brought about, there is still an expectation that SFRS personnel would be called to deal within any incidents on ships which are termed as being 'alongside' i.e. in harbour. Previously across Scotland there was a trained cadre of operational personnel who could deliver an effective response to a marine incident, this is no longer the case. HMFSI is aware that, following the issue being highlighted, there are plans to reinvigorate Tactical Ship Firefighting courses and to equip operational personnel with the necessary skills to deal with ship based incidents.

Recommendation 26



The ongoing planning within the SFRS to reintroduce Tactical Ship Firefighting courses should include consideration of the need that presents itself in the NSDA.

Operational Assurance

142. The SFRS has in place an OA Policy and associated procedures that aims to gather information and "effective feedback and review of performance at operational incidents and training events to influence future practice, enhance performance and improve firefighter safety". HMFSI has undertaken an inspection into OA across the SFRS and the outcomes of that will be covered in more detail within that report which is due for publication in summer 2025. OA however is a topic which is covered in the SDA series of inspections, including this one. The Service OA processes involve pre-incidents, thematic and station audits. These consider levels of station preparedness, during incident monitoring processes by FDOs, and post-incident 'hot debriefs' and structured debriefs. Station-based operational staff within the NSDA were generally but not universally aware of the OA processes, how debriefs work and how information from station audits and operational incidents is collated. Watch officers and FDOs had good levels of awareness of the Operational Assurance Recording and Reporting System (OARRS) and reported that they would know how to input information into it. The Service has a small, dedicated department who request and collate OA information, compile and deliver structured debrief reports and any presentations that may follow, and also issue regular operational updates based on OA information.
143. We can conclude from our fieldwork that station audits are conducted and that their findings are reported back to local management who initiate any action plan outcomes that may be required to be undertaken to address identified deficiencies. It was not always clear that the outcomes of these audits were reported back to stations in a consistent, or sometimes timely way. At present there is an informal briefing post audit

for the on duty WC and, in most cases we were informed of, a follow up informal email to confirm outcomes. Station watch personnel often did not know or had not been informed of any details of the audit outcomes. Many WCs commented that the current station audit process may not indicate the true levels of preparedness. WCs indicated that they would welcome no notice, or limited notice, station audits as they believe this approach gives a better indication of the true levels of preparedness at a station, as well as being a driver for raising standards more generally. Currently a snapshot in time within stations is achieved by the audits, however, this is a snapshot that follows several weeks' notice of the upcoming event and a programme of preparation for it.

144. During incident monitoring for OA is designated as a functional role within the ICS. The NSDA FDOs were all familiar with the role with a number having fulfilled it in live operational settings. It was a concern that the role of OA officers at incidents, outside hot debriefing, was not known about or understood by the personnel at a number of stations in the NSDA. This was particularly the case on the island groups of WIOS. While this was a concern, it may be understandable within the context of the Service being unable to fully populate the functional roles within the ICS as it would more readily be able to do on the mainland. We consider this topic further within the body of the report.
145. Post-incident reviews fall largely into either hot or structured debriefs. We found that NSDA operational staff were very conversant with and regularly conducted a hot debrief at the conclusion of Level 1 (L1) incidents. The WCs or FDOs who undertook these debriefs would summarise any notable issues related to the incident and use the session as a health and welfare check also. While these L1 incidents make up the bulk of the operational activity that is undertaken by the SFRS, it was not clear that any organisational learning was being formally captured from them.
146. Following the conclusion of Level 2 and Level 3 incidents, an OA13 should be completed by all attending FDOs and OICs of operational appliances utilising the OARRS. We found that

the OA13 process was generally followed, but there was criticism of it due to a perceived lack of feedback that the originators of the data receive. This lack of feedback has led to a level of frustration and disengagement with the process, one officer summed it up by commenting that in terms of OA "the SFRS is good at collating information, but not good at disseminating it". We received several comments that the relatively small size of the OA team, their list of responsibilities and the volume of incident information that they will deal with may be reasons for the perceived low level of engagement. HMFSI observes the TSA Board meeting and notes that the OA process is well considered and clearly has learning outputs that improve outcomes from operational incidents that have occurred across the SFRS.

147. It was acknowledged by NSDA personnel that the Frontline Update notifications and Urgent Instructions are dealt with as a priority with watch information sessions normally held to fully debrief and understand their content. Where the Frontline Updates did receive criticism, it was due to them not being published on a frequent enough basis, and that they were considered to be made overly generic through the removal of operational context and consequently losing some of the learning value of the incidents or events that they are based upon. We also came across examples where local debriefs were being collated and hosted based upon the structure of the OA13 process, these being in lieu of output generated by the OA team.

Service Modernisation

148. The Service is currently engaged in considering the next phase of its modernisation process following the temporary removal of 10 fire appliances from stations across Scotland, including 2 from the NSDA. While NSDA personnel were well aware of the ongoing Service Delivery Review programme and its associated ongoing public consultation, we found that many were not overly concerned about the potential impacts upon themselves or their fire stations from any future changes. Many acknowledged that the SFRS must make changes due to budgetary pressures and a changing risk

and operational activity profile that needs to be addressed. Across the NSDA there are a number of On Call stations that have difficulty in maintaining the station TOM and others who have low levels of operational activity. Despite this, many of the personnel at these stations reflected that they may be insulated from any potential changes given their geographical remoteness, and an ongoing need for the SFRS to have in place an adequate operational response to emergency calls in line with the Act.

149. We asked a number of LA executive officers and elected members for their views on any potential future changes in line with SSRP. They told us that they would not wish to lose any local SFRS resources, but they understood that like many other public services, the Service has to address its own budgetary issues. The key to any future change for them, as they advised us, would be a comprehensive communication and engagement process well in advance of any proposed changes.

Partnership

LA Engagement and Community Planning Arrangements

150. An effective Fire and Rescue Service will work in partnership with communities and others in the public, private and third sectors to ensure community wellbeing and to improve community safety outcomes. **The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's overall effectiveness within the NSDA is judged to be Good.**

151. As defined by the Scottish Government in the Fire and Rescue Framework 2022, *"The main purpose of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is to work in partnership with communities and others in the public, private and third sectors, on prevention, protection and response, to improve the safety and wellbeing of people throughout Scotland."* Through this inspection process we have recorded many qualified comments gathered through interviews with LA Chief Executives, Local Council elected members, LA Scrutiny Chairs and Senior Police Commanders that speak to the commitment of SFRS staff to work in partnership in a very wide range of initiatives and interventions within the communities that they serve. The NSDA's partners commented that the SFRS was considered to be a consistent and effective partner and that their work is highly valued. However, we also received multiple comments from within the SFRS and a number from the aforementioned community partners about a reduction in engagement activity caused by the Covid pandemic which has never returned to what the pre-pandemic levels were. In this regard all partners expressed a willingness and a desire to return to the full engagement levels that were previously known, but also a concern that freeing the capacity to do so within their respective organisations would be challenging to achieve.

152. The SFRS has the duty to comply with the legislative requirements of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 for community planning partners to jointly develop a local plan aimed at improving the quality of life for the people experiencing the greatest inequality. During this inspection we found evidence across the North SDA Local Authority areas that the Service is complying

with its statutory duty to work with others within the established community planning arrangements. Across the LA's within the NSDA there were examples of SFRS officers who contributed to joint planning arrangements for the development of LOIPs with follow up community engagement work that produced, in the opinion of the Council executive officers and elected members, outcomes that tackled core themes such as the reduction of poverty within communities, e.g. hosting breakfast clubs, gathering and distributing food parcels to the community, hosting brew with the crew sessions in local fire stations etc. These examples help to put the LOIPs into practice.

153. A common issue that was mentioned across LAs was the impact that SFRS officer turnover has had on maintaining often excellent progress with CS activity in line with the LOIP. That said, we received positive comments about the regular attendance by Service officers at a wide range of community focused forums from strategic to local levels. The issue with officer turnover was that there was a need to reestablish a range of working relationships that had previously been producing positive outcomes, and this was noted as taking time during which some momentum can be lost.

LA Scrutiny and Evaluation of NSDA

154. All LAs across the NSDA commented positively about the consistency and quality of the scrutiny reports that the Service produces. These were noted as having a good mix of quantitative data and qualitative case study examples that were used by SFRS officers to bring any ongoing work to life. Service officers were also praised for the consistency of attendance at the range of scrutiny meetings.

155. It was clear from our interviews with LA partners who are responsible for the scrutiny of SFRS activity that they do not have in place any meaningful evaluation processes of the outcomes and outputs that the Service is achieving. Several commented that evaluation processes may have been in development, but that they were not effectively used at this time. We have noted in the Prevention and Protection section of this report that the SFRS does not effectively evaluate the outcomes of its own initiatives and that a suitable system

should be put in place for this. Effective evaluation would allow the SFRS and the LAs in the North to tailor and improve the service that they offer to their communities.

Recommendation 27



The Service is involved in a wide range of intervention activity with LA partners. This work aligns to the aims set out in LOIPs and tackles the priorities of both the LAs and the SFRS. We would recommend that these interventions are subject to robust evaluation that quantifies the outputs and outcomes that they achieve, thus ensuring the ability to direct resources most appropriately for future joint planned activities.

Civil Contingency and Resilience Planning Arrangements

156. The SFRS has statutory responsibilities under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 to work in partnership with other organisations, through the North of Scotland Regional Resilience Partnership (RRP), and to compile a Community Risk Register (CRR). The RRP has three Local Resilience Partnerships (LRP) i.e. Highlands and Islands, Grampian and Tayside. The RRP has regional workstreams that consider any emerging risks across the North as part of a cyclical North Risk Preparedness Assessment that is overseen by a Risk Capability Group which is chaired by an SFRS officer on behalf of the RRP. The Community Risk Register (CRR) is the result of risk assessments conducted by the partnership members, to identify the likely risks in the area and rate them in terms of their potential impact and likelihood of occurring. The results of these assessments are used to inform the RRP and produce agreed, and effective multi-agency plans and procedures. The CRR considers eight potential generic risks within the North, describes possible consequences from those risks, outlines what the RRP members are doing, and also what the public can do themselves to mitigate risk. The CRR is reviewed and updates at the end

of each Risk Preparedness Assessment cycle to ensure that all plans remain current and up to date.

157. The SFRS provides strong support via the DACO and LSOs for the effective operation of the North RRP and its LRPs that feed into it. Two uniformed SFRS PPP officers have resilience as one of their functional references, and they are supported by support staff Civil Contingency Officers (CCO) who each have extensive knowledge in the field having previously worked within the Service or other emergency Services. LA partners consistently commented that there was strong commitment from individuals, and that working relationships with the SFRS Resilience team were very good, and that their contributions were valued. These personnel however are not managed by the LSO teams, but rather support them through their work with the RRP, LRPs and their various liaison groups as set out above. The CCOs in particular are a constant in this field with officer turnover leading to regular changes of personnel in the SC and GC PPP roles, they will often be the first point of contact for LA personnel in relation to resilience issues or queries.

158. Through our fieldwork we understand that Civil Contingencies and resilience is not a standing agenda item at LSO or SDA meetings. The PPP SC/GC is not consistently required to be at these meetings to be questioned regarding ongoing work within the field. The work that is undertaken by the CCOs is fed into the LSO teams, but there does not appear to be a feedback mechanism that confirms fully that what is ongoing has been fully considered and understood. This possible lack of feedback may have manifested itself during our interviews with operational crews in particular. It was noticeable from the comments we garnered during field work that there are many large infrastructure projects, particularly relating to renewable energy generation and transmission, ongoing within the NSDA. However, when we queried LSO personnel about horizon scanning and preparations that will be necessary for the Service to meet the operational challenges that these large energy generation and/or storage sites could present, there was no obvious training or exercising being developed for them. It is worth saying that the mandatory training

and exercising for sites that are currently regulated e.g. COMAH sites, are within scope and personnel do attend these on a cyclical basis. We had confirmation that no members of the LSO teams or from TSA has engaged with the CCO team regarding potential operational considerations or training to meet the challenges that these sites could present.

Recommendation 28



The Service should strengthen the connection between LSO teams and operational staff and the Civil Contingency and resilience teams. Efforts should be made to understand the local emerging operational risks to ensure that suitable procedures can be developed for them and training can be designed to test their adequacy.

Community Asset Register

159. The SFRS maintains a register of community based assets, i.e. the CAR. The development of the CAR was an outcome of a recommendation from an independent review of water rescue capability in Scotland, conducted by Paddy Tomkins QPM in 2009. The community assets listed on the register are available on request to be used by SFRS operational commanders, in order to provide assistance at an incident. This can be particularly useful when specialist equipment which is not held by the SFRS is needed e.g. high capacity power generators, additional HVPs, specialist search and rescue personnel and their equipment, off road capable vehicles etc. We found that there was some awareness of the CAR amongst FDOs and watch based personnel, but in most cases a limited knowledge of what specific resources were available. We found evidence of limited circumstances in which the CAR had been considered at incidents and that resources had been requested. OC staff had a working knowledge of the CAR and were able to confirm that it is infrequently used.

160. When CAR assets had been used by SFRS personnel it was often on the back of local established relationships with forested, game or farming estates where there was a knowledge of the mutually beneficial outcomes that can be achieved by making available specialist resources, particularly to transport firefighters over wild terrain and allow them easier access to the scene of incidents. While the Tomkins Review set out very clear reasons for a formalising CAR, we received several comments that this would go against the culture of how these resources are mobilised and used when necessary, during operational incidents on Scotland's island groups. People are willing to help, and do so regularly and unprompted. However, our feedback was that they would be reluctant to formally declare their assets. How the CAR operates in remote communities that have a strong ethos of self-sustaining resilience should be an area of consideration for the SFRS. On Orkney we were informed that none of the community resources that are regularly made available during weather events are registered on the CAR. We discussed this issue directly with senior Council leaders on Orkney, and they were fully aware and accepted the situation and informed us that they would not want to diminish any future (ad hoc at this time) community response during a crisis as "locals wouldn't want the formal responsibility of being placed onto a register such as the CAR, it's an issue that needs to be handled sensitively". The islanders' approach to community assistance was clearly recognised and understood by FDOs who commented that "it's the island way, it (the help arriving) just happens".

161. We received a number of examples where privately owned community resilience assets have mobilised on the islands to a range of incidents in a quite organic fashion and outwith the utilisation of the CAR. They clearly added value at those times in fulfilling a number of roles that neither SFRS nor the Local Council assets could not. Notwithstanding the value added on these occasions, the SFRS still has a responsibility to manage the CAR across Scotland. While we will not reiterate Recommendation 5 from the East Service Delivery Area Inspection of October 2023, the SFRS should further consider it in light of the CAR findings set out in this report.

People

162. An effective fire and rescue service recruits, develops and maintains a workforce that is skilled, supported and reflects the diversity of its communities. Its managers promote a culture of fairness and respect. **The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's overall effectiveness within the North SDA is judged to be an Opportunity for Improvement.**

Workforce Planning

163. The SFRS, as with any large organisation, will be subject to variations in its staffing levels which may be impacted by a number of factors such as retirement from service or by staff simply leaving their employment to seek new opportunities elsewhere. The Target Operating Model for WT staff is the ideal number of personnel who are required to allow the SFRS to effectively fulfil its operational functions, for the North SDA this is 538. At the point in time our data request was made to the Service the actual FTE in post number of staff was 543. The variance in FTE posts of five is equivalent to 0.93% of the TOM. In addition, the FDO and off station FTE staff for the NSDA is 109 posts, which is 95.75% of the TOM.
164. The On Call duty system has firefighters who align to either the Retained Duty System or the Volunteer Duty System. Each On Call station has a TOM that is predicated on the number of appliances that operate from that station, and this will normally be between 10 and 20 personnel. Each of these personnel can work up to a 100% contract that requires them to be available for operational calls, drill nights and other duties for up to 120 hours per week. It is common practice for On Call firefighter to have contracts of less than 100%, which decreases the weekly hours available commitment and potentially increases the firefighter numbers if the full contract quota is used up. The SFRS provided data that set its RDS FTE total as 1,933 personnel, with an actual number of 1,269 being in employment. The 1,269 personnel equate to 65.7% of the TOM. Data showed the Volunteer Duty System (VDS) FTE should be set at 100, but that actual number in post was 71 which equates to 71% of the desired TOM. Staffing vacancy levels for individual NSDA RDS stations ranged up to over 80%, with many commonly being over 40%. While there are fewer VDS stations, they too showed vacancy levels of up to 100% but more commonly they averaged at 27%.
165. Turnover of staff within the WT workforce is normally less frequent and more predictable than with staff on other duty systems. The actual NSDA staff turnover in the 12 months to 31st March 2024 was 4.3% for WT, 8.3% for On Call RDS and 5.6% for On Call VDS staff. Under normal circumstances, the Service is able to forecast staffing changes with a degree of accuracy and has more control over the need for recruitment. However, in the preceding two years the figure has been elevated beyond what would normally be the case, e.g. the East and West SDA reports found the figure to be 8.6% and 7.5% respectively. Recent changes made to the Firefighters' Pension Scheme, resulted in a sudden unpredictable spike in retirements of firefighters, which has had an impact on workforce planning numbers. The NSDA WT firefighter leaver numbers perhaps show a return to more recognised levels for the SFRS. What has been found in common with the inspections in the East and West SDAs is that there has been the loss of many skilled and experienced firefighters as well as Incident Commanders and Managers. We were provided with examples of concern from station personnel, managers and internal and external partners regarding high turnover of staff and the subsequent loss in experience and continuity. The impacts of the pension changes upon the SFRS retirement profile were somewhat inevitable and therefore predictable. With the level of predictability there is an expectation that the Service may have planned for and taken action to address any impact with increased leadership and management development for newly promoted supervisory managers, as well as the necessary training and supervision for the remaining, and sometimes less experienced, WT firefighter cadre.
166. Succession planning is an integral part of workforce planning, ensuring that there is a developed workforce able to replace others who are promoted and those that leave the SFRS. The SFRS has a centrally managed and established promotion, selection and development programme. The turnover of FDO

staff across the NSDA was a noted concern for many personnel, who often commented that it was difficult to establish lasting working relationships or to deliver work outcomes due to frequency of change. To illustrate this point we were informed that one of the main islands in WIOS had seen 16 Station Commanders in post in the preceding six years. While often not as acute as this situation, there has been a turnover of FDOs driven quite rightly by the Service putting staff in place where they are needed. We asked what a remedy for this issue would be and were told local officers were the key to stability and longevity in posts locally based. It was therefore welcomed that the NSDA has recently run promotion processes with a focus on attracting local officers, or officers who were willing to commit to living within the SDA. The turnover of FDO staff was also commented upon widely by partners within Local Authorities who believed it to be an inhibitor to the continuation of the positive partnership work that they engage in with the Service.

Recruitment and Retention

167. The recruitment of WT and On Call personnel into the SFRS is managed centrally by the People Directorate. The Service provides prospective applicants with background information regarding working for the organisation and on what the recruitment process entails, e.g. details of the medical, fitness tests, psychometric test, practical examination and selection centre. Applying for vacancies is done online.

168. The recruitment and retention of personnel into the On Call duty system is cited as a concern for many officers within the NSDA. Within the NSDA the maintenance of fire appliance availability was considered to be “a massive issue” that has seen the introduction of a number of initiatives in an effort to support it, e.g. the use of bank hours for strategically placed personnel, dual mobilising between On Call stations to make up full crews to attend incidents and the establishment of the A9 roadway corridor that is predicated on appliances being available at all times at locations along it.

169. Across the NSDA there are a number of open vacancies for On Call firefighter personnel at any time. The majority of fire stations across the NSDA operate the On Call system of work. Recruitment to the On Call was a topic

that was often referred to as a top priority and a concern for leaders and managers across the NSDA. The evidence of recruitment campaigns at stations was clear from the amount of posters and banners that we could view within stations, and we were often given details of ongoing efforts to recruit interested and suitable applicants. The WCs of On Call stations were generally very focused on attracting new trainees and could describe their current and ongoing efforts in this regard. The levels of ongoing vacancies within On Call stations has an inevitable impact upon the general availability of their appliances, and this is the case for many stations across the NSDA as demonstrated by data that was shared with the inspection team.

170. The SFRS introduced a Pre-Recruitment Engagement Programme (PREP) that allowed any prospective On Call firefighter trainee to gain an insight into life within the Service, to undergo initial suitability for the job checks and also to receive practical advice and support for their application. Practical support examples include in advising them on the achievement of the fitness standards that will be required to be attained, for many trainee candidates this has historically been a point of failure. PREP is also an opportunity for candidates to be advised of the steps and requirements that are contained within the recruitment process and to allow prospective candidates to consider if they will meet them e.g. eyesight standards. As we conducted interviews with On Call station staff as part of this inspection, we encountered several individuals who were actively engaged with the PREP process, and they could attest to its value. They also told us that the main frustration was the length of time it can take to go from application to entry to the Service. While we were advised by WCs and OCSWCs of a range of timescales for entry to Service, the most common answer to this question was circa 12 months. We were commonly told “we get people interested and then there are issues with medicals and processing of applications” during which time it was not uncommon for candidates to lose faith in the process and interest in the role and to remove themselves as a consequence. The examples of this offered to us were numerous. As On Call recruitment was cited as a consistent concern for personnel within the NSDA, it will form an In Focus topic for this report.

171. When an applicant completes the recruitment process and is offered a place as a trainee On Call firefighter, they must then attend an initial two week TTM course followed by a Breathing Apparatus (BA) course which takes a further two weeks to complete. These two initial courses require a significant commitment from trainees who are often required to take time away from their primary employment and to use periods of annual leave to do so. Where these courses have operated on a modular basis and been broken down to be accommodated over weekends, the change has been very welcomed by the trainees. We were given examples of a number of instances where essential training courses were cancelled at short and very short notice. When this has occurred it has a significant impact upon the trainees as they often have personal and workplace arrangements in place that then have to be undone. Those who had experienced this disruption suggested that when the Service informed them of any cancellation, and the need to reschedule courses, that it demonstrated a lack of understanding for those who have committed to the On Call role. While the Service told us that efforts are taken to ensure course cancellations are minimised, we were given numerous examples of this occurring and of the impact it has on applicants and their families.

172. To ensure that the administration and allocation of On Call courses is done effectively, the SFRS has introduced a Training Support Coordinator role within its training function. This role has been judged to be a success and has helped establish a single point of contact for course allocations and candidate and trainee queries. A number of Service personnel expressed a concern that the administrative capacity to deal with course allocations and management had been reduced in recent times. The introduction of the coordinator role may have gone some way to alleviating this. As we understand it, the training function is currently considering proposals to have the capacity of this, at present single role, augmented by the addition of another person into this small team.

Recommendation 29



The SFRS should review the reasons for On Call course cancellations and where possible put in place appropriate solutions to minimise such occurrences.

173. While the personal commitment to the required 120 hours per week On Call contract is highly commendable for those who can do so, there are many who have variations of this that allows them to commit to fewer hours but to add their capacity to maintaining station availability. Lifestyle, society and demographics have all changed in recent times, and the ask of On Call staff has changed also, and this often does not fit with the 100% contract. We found that the SFRS would only commit to a variation in contract to 75% of the 120 hours per week, i.e. 90 hours. There was frustration amongst local FDOs and WCs that 50% contract lengths could not be used as they often had local people who could commit to that, often during daytime working hours of 9 am to 5 pm which coincides with the most challenging period for appliance availability. During the course of our fieldwork for this inspection the SFRS consulted upon and introduced new contracts for On Call personnel which allows for a wider variance in contracts, this is welcome and should have a positive impact upon the Service's ability to attract a wider range of trainees from local communities.

Good Practice 7



The introduction of the new On Call contract arrangements is positive and should offer greater degrees of flexibility for the existing personnel in the group, and for future firefighters that may be able to commit to the new terms.

174. The NSDA is unique in that it provides the services of the SFRS in some of Scotland's most geographically isolated places, including a number of inhabited islands. In many of these places the recruitment and retention of

On Call personnel faces unique demographic challenges. SFRS supplied data that shows that a number of stations in remote locations are consistently below the personnel levels to maintain appliance availability. A number of these stations may only have 50 to 60 viable members of the community who could be employed as On Call firefighters. Against this backdrop, a frustration for local recruitment managers and station WCs is the national standards that are applied for entry criteria, e.g. eyesight, levels of physical fitness, contract hours requirements etc. Clearly national standards being applied to a population of a city or town will in all likelihood enable suitable candidates to be identified, but this may not always be the case when dealing with a micro community on a small island.

In Focus: On Call Recruitment

175. The SFRS has a number of parties who play key roles in the recruitment process for On Call firefighters. The People Directorate has a small team that is dedicated to maintaining an IT Tracker System. This can be accessed by SC level local recruitment managers and OCSWCs, who play a key role in managing the onboarding to employment processes for new entrants. The Tracker shows the steps that are required to be completed by an individual before an offer of employment can be made by the SFRS, these include ideal PREP timescales, available dates for fitness testing, medicals, interviews, PVG clearance checks indicative timescales and TTM training course dates that are scheduled. All of the details included on the Tracker are decided before its publication and then included within an annual plan. As we understand it the finalisation of PREP is dependent upon the needs of individual candidates, but all other annual plan and Tracker details are discussed in detail with local SDA/LSO recruitment managers before it is finalised and goes live each year. The People team have “very good relationships with recruitment managers”, but require them to follow the details and the timings within the Tracker, and to update individual candidates progress regularly to ensure the system operates effectively and that TTM dates can be achieved.

176. A significant challenge in managing the Tracker system is in the capacity that is available to the dedicated People Directorate On Call recruitment team. We understand

that this comprises one manager and two junior graded administration posts. Many officers within the NSDA who use the Tracker system informed us that the recruitment team previously had an additional four senior admin team members employed on temporary contracts, and that they added significant value to it. Interviewees told us that the current admin team “do a wonderful job”, but with 54 SFRS OCSWCs and a number of NSDA recruitment managers seeking updates and reports on their individual candidate’s progress, their capacity is very limited due to a challenging workload. The four individuals who were employed on temporary contracts, and “who knew and understood the recruitment processes very well”, were not retained on fulltime contracts as part of a Directorate rationalisation. The maintenance of these contracts and the personnel who filled them was an option for the SFRS, but their employment was ended, and the resource was allocated to different business areas within the Directorate. Following this process, it was felt by those personnel who were engaged across the NSDA in attempting to get new entrants into employment as On Call firefighters that “much of the support from the People Directorate was essentially gone”, this despite the ongoing best efforts of the Tracker team to facilitate their needs. Across our interviews for this In Focus topics, it was agreed that the required administration capacity for the management of the Tracker, set against what is now available, is a challenge.

Recommendation 30



The SFRS should review the administrative capacity that is available for the efficient and effective management of the On Call Tracker system. This review should include seeking the views of those who manage the Tracker within the People Directorate and those who act as recruitment managers in the SDAs. If necessary additional capacity should be made available for this small team.

177. Despite the challenges that On Call recruitment faces, the People Directorate Tracker team are working hard to bridge the gap between themselves and the LSO areas to meet the Service's On Call recruitment needs. It was clear to us that there is some confusion around who has responsibility for overseeing some of the Tracker monitoring and updates, as well as for securing the dates and available slots that are clearly indicated within the annual plan each year for medicals, TTM courses etc. The Tracker team noted that "On Call recruitment is being tackled differently within different LSO areas, with varying degree of buy in" to the optimal process. In this regard there may be synergies to be gained through a renewed communications and engagement with local recruitment managers and the OCSWCs who are involved with the whole process. We have also commented elsewhere within this report about the capacity of the OCSWC cadre being used on areas of work that are most impactful for the Service. On Call recruitment is one such area, and that they may be sacrificing capacity to more time stealing and laborious tasks such as appliance movements.

Recommendation 31



The People Directorate should reengage with SDA personnel who have responsibility for local recruitment and user management of the Tracker system to fully set out its use for optimal outcomes.

178. It is a source of frustration that there appears to be a limited number of local medical tests available in the NSDA with candidates often travelling considerable distances from their homes in the NSDA to more urban areas of Scotland to access these. The People Directorate told us that they have previously tried to source local GP surgeries where the necessary medicals could be undertaken, but there was a very limited number who could perform the full range of tests, e.g. the hearing test, and those who could undertake them would only do so at significant cost. The Directorate felt that potential issues such as this could be more clearly identified to candidates during their PREP phase. There is also the issue of the time that may be

necessary for candidates to access a medical far from their hometown; it will often mean a full day away from their primary employment at a financial cost to themselves. We were told that the final slot offered for medicals would be at 4pm during the working day and that no more 'candidate friendly' evening slots are offered. The medicals themselves take a limited amount of time which in effect means a full day has to be set aside for candidates to travel to and from, as well as undergo, the necessary tests which themselves will take under an hour. The medical (and fitness) requirements for entry to the On Call are predicated upon national standards. We have set out elsewhere within this report the geographic and demographic challenges that this brings relative to more populated areas of the UK when trying to attract suitable On Call candidates. Many NSDA officers and recruitment managers feel that this is a challenge, particularly when there is a limited potential workforce, and the standards being applied are inhibiting potential candidates from applying for open vacancies in the On Call within their community. The recent West SDA report recommended that called for "developing and implementing pragmatic and alternative solutions for local recruitment" into the On Call. This report findings concurs with that assessment following our inspection in the NSDA.

Recommendation 32



The Service should review the entry standards for personnel applying to join the On Call with a view to introducing a range of metrics that support the entry of candidates from smaller demographic pools.

179. We raised a series of concerns as described to us by NSDA personnel in relation to the order in which the elements of the Tracker system must be achieved in the management of each On Call trainee application. Much of this concerned the linear sequence for completion of application activities on the Tracker. The People Directorate team explained to us why the Tracker events must be carried out sequentially, and in effect cannot be fast tracked or undertaken concurrently. Several

of these issues were subject to regulatory control, e.g. no pre employment checks for any prospective trainee can be undertaken before a formal offer of employment is made, in effect this is a legal issue. NSDA recruitment managers had felt that pre employment checks undertaken and conclude at an early stage would enable candidates to be allocated slots on upcoming TTM courses. The view of the Directorate team was that close adherence to the Tracker timetable, which is advised in the agreed annual plan, is key to managing recruitment efficiently and would alleviate the potential for candidates missing upcoming TTM courses. While we accept that the SFRS operates a “one service approach for consistency” and that the Tracker process cannot be truncated, there may be scope for additional administrative resource to be applied to its management that would allow earlier communication with concerned recruitment managers in an effort to resolve any issues. We have made a recommendation within this report to that effect. There was also a concern conveyed to us by the Directorate team that the turnover of local SDA recruitment managers through promotions and retirements may be having a detrimental impact upon the ongoing management of On Call recruitment activity.

180. The key objective of following the Tracker process is to ensure that new entrants to the On Call cadre can be on-boarded, placed into employment with the SFRS, and then undertake the necessary training for them to be an operational firefighter. The first key stage in the operational journey is to access a TTM course during which the basic training for an On Call firefighter can be undertaken. Following the TTM four modular courses are required to also be completed, the most urgent of these being BA training. Both the TTM and BA courses take two weeks each to complete. The TTM date can be forecast per the Tracker, and local recruitment managers should estimate the time to complete the individual elements of the Tracker and forecast when and where their trainee candidate can access their initial training course. As set out above, there is an SFRS requirement for recruitment managers to closely follow the Tracker; doing so will be the most efficient way of ensuring TTM course allocations in line with the candidates and their own expectations. The

management of TTM course allocations was felt to have become somewhat less controlled locally for the NSDA following the recent reorganisation into the National Instructor Pool (NIP) which resulted in two SC posts and their capacity being reallocated elsewhere within the training function. Local SDA managers feel that much of the governance and management of TTM scheduling now has to be covered by them, where it would previously been done by the local training officers, and is therefore actually a drain on their capacity and is an unforeseen consequence of the NIP approach. HMFSI understands that an NSDA SC has now been required to effectively take over much of this administration, where it would have previously been carried out by training functional officers. We were advised by Training Safety and Assurance (TSA) that the securing and allocation of the four modular courses that trainees are required to undertake following completion of the TTM is the responsibility of the local SDA officers. From our interview discussion across the NSDA we do not believe that this is clearly understood. Many trainees expressed their frustration in relation to getting suitable dates at local venues for the additional training courses. The exception to this was for trainees who undertook their TTM at Portlethen training centre, these trainees were informed during the course where and when all of the four additional courses were to be delivered. Portlethen appears to be an outlier in this regard, and this is due to an initiative that was introduced by the management at that facility. Quite simply the FDO would forecast course dates and allocate them for TTM candidates who were scheduled to undertake it at his facility. This initiative has been a success and was very welcomed by the On Call trainees and their WCs. For others, caught in what can be a lengthy waiting game, it was clearly frustrating. As we understand it, this successful initiative has been put forward as best practice that would reduce inefficiency in course allocations, and can be repeated at other training locations, but to date it frustratingly has not been used elsewhere. The introduction of this approach, or a similar initiative across the NSDA and the wider SFRS, would ensure that On Call trainees could access all of the initial training courses that they require at the earliest possible date, thus allowing them to count towards station availability asap.

Good Practice 8

An initiative to allocate dates for training courses for On Call trainees following TTM has been a success in parts of the NSDA. The SFRS should consider and where possible replicate the initiative and its outcomes.

Recommendation 33

The Service should consider if the current administrative capacity for the allocation and management of TTM and follow on courses for On Call trainees is suitable and sufficient. If necessary, addition capacity should be introduced with a view to facilitating courses and making trainees available for operational deployment.

Training and Development

181. Training, Safety and Assurance Directorate (TSA) recently introduced a new Training Function Vision and Strategy 2023-28. The intention is to provide a Skills Maintenance Framework, Training Delivery Framework and Training Assets Framework to improve the performance of training throughout the Service. In order to achieve the outcomes of this strategy, it was felt that there was a need to increase training capacity and to alter the previous local training support structures into a single training function as part of the TSA. As a result, the previous NSDA local training functions merged into the NIP as part of a single SFRS Training Function, with the aim of ensuring training is centrally co-ordinated and locally delivered.
182. Some of the officers in the NSDA believe that the introduction of the Training Function approach has seen a loss of control in addressing local training needs as National Core Skills, Refresher and Specialist Skills courses take precedence. When we consider

that the attainment of these National course outcomes will be for NSDA personnel, this assertion presents a juxtaposition which can perhaps be better understood by the allocation of significant levels of TSA capacity and resource to achieve the desired outcome of the BA Recovery Programme. The recovery plan is achieving positive results, but it has been extended for a second time and does continue to be a significant focus for the TSA which will inevitably lead to less capacity being available to apply in other areas. This is a view that was shared by NSDA officers and TSA staff. It is worthy of note that the recovery plan outcomes are widely reported within the SFRS and as such are very visible and subject to scrutiny across a number of Service fora.

183. The TSA team in the NSDA told us about the levels of engagement that they undertake with their service delivery colleagues in the NSDA. This is done on a quarterly basis and has a strong focus on the local Training Needs Analysis (TNA), particularly for dynamic or developing issues, to try to ensure that local needs can be addressed promptly. There was however a concern expressed to us that the needs identified by the TNA cannot be fully addressed within the existing instructor capacity that is available for TSA to deploy. Following the introduction of the TSA strategy, an impediment to this engagement has been the redeployment of a SC within the NSDA who would have had training as their function. The unintended consequence of this has been a loss of a dedicated role to consider SDA training issues that are identified and the administrative capacity to deal with them. As we understand it a service delivery SC now has responsibility for this role alongside their other duties. We were informed of this issue during several interviews. Linked to the fulfilment of the TNA needs through local training delivery are the current Terms and Conditions (T&Cs) of the TSA instructional staff within the NSDA. Currently the T&Cs do not align to the start and finish times of courses and the goodwill of the staff has to be relied upon in many instances to ensure training delivery. This goodwill often comes at the expense of time in lieu leave being accrued by instructional staff, which in turn can impact planning for training delivery.

184. As described above, the provision of training support in the NSDA is via the Training Function who are part of the national training team, which is part of the TSA Directorate. There are regional training sites located within the NSDA at Portlethen, Invergordon and Perth. The central function for TSA is based at the SFRS National Training Centre (NTC) at Cambuslang. The Training Function teams at the three training sites in the NSDA are responsible for delivering courses, such as Recruit training, BA Refresher, Compartment Fire Behaviour, Tactical Ventilation, Incident Command and Driver Training. The training staff support both technical and practical input in a range of core and specialist skills, such as Casualty Care, HazMat, Knots and Lines, RTC extrication, water awareness, SWAH, Incident Command and Trainee Phases. There are Local Training Plans developed and kept under review which consider the skills, including specialisms, and capabilities required to effectively respond to the risks identified in the NSDA. We were provided evidence that these plans are in place to ensure ongoing training and development for WT and On Call staff. Station WCs told us that the training centres offered good support to them and their trainees, particularly as they approached their end of phase training assessments.
185. WT trainees attend a three-month course at a SFRS training centre. Following graduation from this course trainees then go into development phases, Red, Amber and Green each of which culminates in a range of practical exercises and formal assessment. At the successful conclusion of the Green Phase assessment the trainees can then be designated as competent firefighters. As reported in the East and West SDA reports, we encountered trainees who had completed their development plans but had difficulty in having the sign off to competence process completed due to a lack of Assessors and Verifiers nationally to approve these plans. The Service has worked through many of these issues leading to this problem, but the impacts are still being felt by trainee firefighters and their watch officers who have responsibility for them.
186. Initial training for an On Call firefighter is to attend a two-week TTM course, followed by a further two weeks BA training. The initial training for On Call staff can be a barrier to entry to the Service, as it often impacts their primary employment or their leave entitlement from it. The Service is actively looking at improving the recruitment and initial training experience for On Call firefighters through its long running national On Call improvement programme. Within the NSDA, as elsewhere in the Service, we understand that some On Call training is delivered in modular format over weekends, thus taking pressure off of trainees in relation to their primary employment. Individuals who had accessed this weekend training found the experience very positive. The SFRS should maintain a focus on, and further enhance, this work where possible.
187. As mentioned within the East and West SDA reports, the Service made changes to its TFoC programme for its firefighters in 2022. Core skills modules are covered over a 12-month period with other advanced modules to be concluded over a 36-month period. This continuous learning is delivered via the Learning Content Management System (LCMS). The changes that were introduced have been widely welcomed by station based personnel. Watch based operational firefighters, and their WCs told us that the modules and their video content was significantly more user friendly, and the reduced number meant “less time in front of a computer” and allowed for more time to be spent engaged in practical training.
188. During our fieldwork for this inspection, we had the opportunity to view recently renovated fire stations in the NSDA. The personnel who operate from these stations were generally happy with their working environment, including the availability of computers and their supporting IT infrastructure. We viewed stations that had computer desks in common areas of the station as well as in the individual bedrooms of the watch personnel. While this could lead to firefighters completing training in isolation and possibly missing social engagement and interaction as they do so, it clearly solves a perennial issue that is raised by station personnel, i.e. the lack

of access to computers to complete LCMS training and to markup individual records. Poor internet connection, and restricted access to computers, particularly in On Call fire stations was an issue that was raised in the East and West SDA reports, and continued to be during the interviews for the NSDA. For On Call personnel this lack of accessibility is a barrier to their effective learning which takes time and consideration to overcome. The On Call crews told us of many instances such as LCMS learning “done at my kitchen table as I can’t download the videos at the station”. Some On Call stations have resorted to accessing the LCMS system as individuals from their homes during select dates to ensure the learning can be accessed as a group.

189. The majority of on-station training delivery to firefighters comes via watch supervisory officers. Training at On Call stations is supported via the Training Function, with regular scheduled attendance by instructors who will assist with the delivery of what should be pre planned training activity. We found a mix of views regarding the regularity of these visits to On Call stations, and the value that they offer. Staff at some stations said they received consistent monthly or quarterly visits, while others told us it was many months since an instructor had last attended. From the views we gathered about the impact that the Training Function has had regarding training support to stations in the NSDA, it appears that an inconsistent approach may have been applied. While NSDA personnel view the introduction of the Training Function as not being wholly positive, TSA believes that the consolidation of the instructional staff has been beneficial as it has led to more efficient use of the instructional staff capacity. We were informed of a new initiative pilot that has been introduced in Quarter 1 of 2025 which will ensure that each On Call station will get at least one scheduled visit per quarter from a Training Function instructor as a minimum. The schedule of these visits can vary depending on the number of WT staff dual contracting at On Call stations. As such, it can reduce accordingly where less support is deemed to be required. TSA officers told us that there may have been a lack of structure to the visits in the past and that better planning is required to ensure the TFoC can be fully supported. As such Quarter 1 will be predominantly BA and RTC and the Training Function team will also consider targeted visits where clear development needs are identified. Quarter 2 will see confirmation multi-pump exercises organised by On Call WCs as clusters, which the Training Function will support and assist with facilitation. While this initiative appears to be sound in structure and approach, it is a concern that the TSA staff, who are introducing it, did not know if it would be replicated across the SFRS. Indeed, they told us that the Service wide approach for this support was somewhat disjointed, and that good practice is often not replicated elsewhere.
190. The TSA has also, in collaboration with the NSDA, recently introduced new training support CC roles for remote areas including on the islands of WIOS. These personnel will assist with core training work including preparation of trainee for phased assessments, BA refreshers, RTC refreshers etc. This innovative approach will mean a semi-permanent training instructor presence in some of the more difficult to reach areas of the SDA.
191. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines competence as “the ability to undertake responsibilities and perform activities to a recognised standard on a regular basis. It combines practical and thinking skills, knowledge and experience.” Once a firefighter has acquired a specific skill, maintenance of the skill is achieved using the TFoC modules mentioned earlier. Training standards define a further three-year cycle when skills are refreshed at a defined national training centre. Operational readiness within the SFRS is measured across competence in TFoC core skills, National Core Skills and National Specialist Skills. Nationally the Service sets a compliance performance target of 95% for the workforce. Performance in the NSDA for each of these areas is set out in the tables below.

Core Skills - TFoC 24/25	% Competence WT	% Competence RDS	% Competence Volunteer
Breathing Apparatus	84%	60%	25%
Casualty Care	87%	64%	53%
Incident Command	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available
Knots and Lines	81%	63%	20%
RTC & Extrication	90%	72%	58%
RTC with designated Vehicle	79%	72%	36%
Hazardous Materials	84%	68%	35%
SWAH	90%	71%	54%
Water Awareness	89%	70%	61%
Driving	88%	63%	62%

Table 2: Core Skills TFoC 2024/25

Core Skills - National Refresher 24/25	% Competence WT	% Competence RDS	% Competence Volunteer
*Breathing Apparatus Refresher	91	92	65
*Compartment Fire Behaviour Refresher	94	86	49
*Tactical Ventilation Refresher	76	78	26
Incident Command L1 Refresher	96	95	88
Emergency Response Driving Refresher	85	87	80
Driving	85	87	80

*BA Apparatus, Compartment Fire Behaviour and Tactical Ventilation Refresher delivered as 3 in 1 training day as part of BA Recovery Programme

Table 3: National Core Skills Refresher programme competence 2024/25

Specialist Skills - National Refresher 24/25	% Competence NSDA**
Heavy Rescue	99
Urban Search and Rescue	78
Water Rescue	*118
Rope Rescue	*123
Mass Decontamination	81

*Figures in excess of 100% indicate additional persons trained for resilience.

**TSA advise that they do not divide out WT from RDS as majority competence is within WT.

Table 4: National Specialist Skills Refresher programme competence 2024/25

192. We can observe from Table 2 that WT staff in the NSDA are generally maintaining core skills at an attainment level between 79% and 90%, which is below the 95% national standard on all counts. On Call RDS Staff are generally maintaining core skills attainment levels between 60% and 72%, which is significantly below the national standard that the SFRS aims to achieve. The On Call Volunteer group within the NSDA is numerically small, but they do serve some geographically isolated communities. The Volunteers fall well below the maintenance of skill percentages across all core skills with attainment ranging between 20% and 62%. Given their relative isolation in the event of operational incidents, this should be a concern for the NSDA.

Recommendation 34



We recommend that the NSDA reviews its delivery of Core Skill TFoC training with improvement in levels of attainment at On Call RDS and Volunteer stations considered a priority.

193. From Table 3 we can see that that WT and On Call RDS in the NSDA are generally having core skills refresher training delivered to a similar attainment level, and while this is below the 95% target level, it is on a positive upward trajectory. It is encouraging to note that the attainment levels for refresher training for both the On Call RDS and Volunteers, who are a much smaller group numerically, are significantly higher than that which was recorded in the West SDA report. This level of attainment aligns with our interview findings which suggest that significant levels capacity and resource have been directed by TSA towards this achievement. With this significant capacity application there is a concern that other areas of training suffer, “we manage BA recovery well, but TNA needs can’t be met within the (remaining) capacity we have”. Others commented that the refresher training programme was “visible from a scrutiny point of view, it is the top priority” and therefore attracts significant capacity to improve its performance reporting outcomes. Despite the relative success achieved in BA refresher training via the BA Recovery Programme, we received a significant level of comments

from NSDA personnel that they would like to have more training time in live fire “hot wear” situations during this training. While HMFSI can appreciate this frustration, the TSA management team are required to balance several variables here including exposure of trainees and instructors to repeated high temperatures, exposure to fire contaminants and ensuring courses attendees and delivery staff can effectively decontaminate post wear and have access to clean PPE for the rest of their training session or duties that follow. The Volunteer group although below the SFRS target of 95% attainment, is favourable when compared to the data provided for HMFSI as contained in the West SDA report.

Good Practice 9



HMFSI note the increase in attainment levels for the Core Skills National Refresher training programme.

Recommendation 35



We recommend that the Service reviews the delivery of its Core Skills National Refresher programme and works toward achieving its stated levels of attainment. Attainment levels for On Call Volunteers should be treated as a priority.

194. TSA provided the data for Table 4, but were unable to separate the percentages for the WT and On Call RDS. Table 4 shows that personnel in the NSDA are generally having specialist skills refreshed at a National Training Centre to a varying standard with some notable successes in Water Rescue and Rope Rescue, with the competence levels for both at heightened levels for resilience purposes. However, there are lower levels of attainment for Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) and Mass Decontamination refresher training. Our previous East and West SDA reports advised of difficulty in providing USAR refreshers, but we note a recent success in that the NSDA hosted local training for this

competence. Data provided for HMFSI shows increases in the levels of specialist skills refresher training across the SFRS for 2024-25.

Recommendation 36



We recommend that the Service reviews the delivery model for its Specialist Skills National Refresher programme, and works toward achieving its stated levels of attainment for those areas that are currently deficient.

195. There is a concern that the fire appliance vehicles used for driver training within the NSDA are beyond their optimal life. Several of these vehicles are between 13 and 18 years old, and have suffered a range of faults that we are told has led to a number of driving course cancellations. The driver training section within the NSDA has begun to compile a consolidated list of these faults and the impacts that they can have on the delivery of driving courses. Another cause for concern with these aged vehicles is that they often do not incorporate technologies such as an Electronic Stability Programme (ESP) that are found in modern fire appliances. This has led to personnel undertaking LGV driving courses in vehicles that they will most likely never drive in an operational context, and will then return to their stations and have to drive fire appliances that do have ESP. When this is the case, an additional day's familiarisation training must be organised in the station vehicle which in effect takes it off the run. We understand that the driver training section operates a paper-based portfolio system for trainees who are required to complete it, and that this does not interface with the Services PDR system.

196. Many of observations made in the previous paragraphs are supported by our NSDA survey. We asked the question 'Do you feel confident that you are adequately trained for your role, how would you rate this?' The mean average rating for this question was 7.63 in the NSDA compared to 7.11 in the West Service Delivery Area (WSDA) and 7.12 in the East Service Delivery Area (ESDA), so very similar. A lot of the positively rated responses were supported by narrative claiming they

felt they were "adequately trained". Of these, the more positive scorings refer to being adequately trained for the role, but an ask for more training time generally, and in particular for hands on practical training, which was clearly valued by the survey responders. While we had a significant number of responses that praised TFoC for offering a structured approach to training in stations, this was somewhat offset by responses that referred to too much reliance on it and LCMS theory self-led training. A number expressed concerns, which were also communicated to us during station interviews, about a perceived lack of practical 'hot' carbonaceous BA training outwith the National Skills Refresher programme.

197. Incident Command training is delivered to Service officers based on the level of incident that they may be expected to take command of in line with the ICS. Training for these operational command roles has traditionally been delivered via courses at dedicated sites equipped with mock incident command units, live participant role playing, and underpinned by an IT software based events scenario(s). During Covid it was not possible to bring the students for these courses together in confined classroom spaces, and remote virtual Incident Command Level (ICL) courses were introduced. We were told that the use of remote ICL courses has continued, but that in the opinion of some of the participants, they lose some significant part of their effectiveness through loss of personal interaction and peer to peer learning. The virtual approach, in the opinion of a number of our interviewees, "doesn't reflect the job on the ground" and that some element of practical exercising would allow a deeper understanding of the ICS and the functional roles that officers may be expected to perform during operational incidents. The comments we received during interviews were reflected within the narrative responses to our survey. Another significant and consistent point that was raised in relation to ICL courses, was the amount of focus which was placed throughout the course on passing the assessment that follows. Many officers felt that the ICL course was more about passing the assessment than developing operational commanders and that this may take away some of the emphasis on the deeper learning that many students would have hoped for.

198. The availability of scrap cars for RTC training remains a regularly highlighted issue during our SDA inspections. At many stations personnel reported that they receive only one car per year. This vehicle has to be used over an extended period of time to practice key stabilisation and cutting techniques that would be used in an operational context. It is a concern for operational personnel that they often cannot engage in a full range of training activities in concentrated sessions, as would be the case at an operational incident.

Leadership and Management Development

199. We consider the preparation for promotion and then further development of operational officers throughout their careers to be a critical foundation for the success of the SFRS. Learning, teaching and development approaches within the fire service have changed since the days of the recent past when the National examination system, and residential courses at the Fire Service College serviced a great deal of the management and leadership needs of the officer cadre. However, the need is still there, and it has not diminished. We spoke to a wide range of NSDA supervisory, middle and strategic managers during the course of the fieldwork for this inspection.

200. Given the frequency of these comments and the triangulated nature of them across the management groups, it was considered necessary to give them a greater deal of consideration and to allow the SFRS to reply to the comments that we garnered and the observations we had made during our fieldwork. The comments that we received during fieldwork were supported by our survey which asked, 'For any promoted role did you receive any induction, Leadership and/or Management training?', 55% of our respondents said that they had not. Officer leadership, and management development and training, therefore forms one of our 'In Focus' topics for this report.

In Focus: SFRS Officer Leadership and Management training and Development

201. While we found that pockets of locally organised training and development relating to management, and to a lesser extent leadership, was ongoing, there was very little positive affirmation or experience of a centrally organised Service development. It would be unfair to suggest that no corporate

development programmes are ongoing, as a Management Development Framework (MDF) pilot programme is currently running, and requests for training have allowed personnel to access an online Franklin Covey training package. Through our fieldwork we learned that the Service currently has 2,250 supervisory level managers who may require leadership and management training. This 2,250 total would increase when middle and strategic level managers are also considered. However, given that over two quarters of 2024 a total 160 candidates accessed the first of three days proposed training for the MDF, and two cohorts of 18 and 17 respectively accessed the Franklin Covey modules, then the SFRS has much ground to make up.

202. At the time of writing this report the MDF has been through two years of governance within the SFRS and has still not been fully signed off, with the request for funding agreed. Given the pressing need, and the lack of development pathways for managers within the SFRS at an organisational level, it is important that a coherent and joined-up approach is agreed. During our fieldwork we asked managers at all levels within the Service if they felt that they had been adequately prepared for their roles upon promotion and subsequently thereafter. Unfortunately, the answer to this was a near universal no, particularly for training and development from a corporate level i.e. there was a view that the SFRS puts little in place to prepare officers for their roles. There are local initiatives across the SDAs to prepare personnel, and the operational mentoring process was cited as valuable, but often the answer that we received was that preparation consisted of "an ICL course, a set of car keys and a San C Radio". As has been noted within our recent report 'Mental Health and Wellbeing Support in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service', transition into promoted posts and a failure to prepare personnel for these changes can have a significant and adverse impact upon the mental health of individuals. In our inspection survey we asked if personnel had received induction or leadership and management training in preparation for their new roles, 55% answered that they had not. Aside from those who have participated in the MDF pilot and the limited online courses we have described, the majority told us that any leadership and management training that

they have undertaken has either been self-directed private learning or was delivered via their legacy Service before the formation of the SFRS.

203. What is currently being proposed within the Service to bridge the gap in the provision of development for managers is for the MDF to deliver a number of (still to be agreed) modules over three training days and to address any individuals specifically identified needs via a Learning Needs Analysis (LNA) linked to appraisals. It is clear that the MDF is still in development, and that it may, given the period of time it has taken to get to the stage it is currently at, still be some time before a fully agreed and functioning format is delivering the necessary outputs and outcomes for the SFRS and individual managers. The LNA is considered to be a process that does deliver outcomes, but which also has its own limitations. A number of budget allocations are made each year via the LNA for identified training needs, but some of these have subsequently been returned at the end of the recent financial years due to training not being purchased. The outcome of this is that significant levels of LNA budget is not spent.
204. Through the ongoing work of the Inspectorate, it is clear that personnel across the SDAs are committed, and seek to deliver the best outcomes that they can. Staff are very actively engaged in a number of areas as they seek to produce positive outcomes for Scotland's communities. However, we did receive comments that this work prioritisation can lead to pressures on capacity which impacts time being set aside for development work. Engagement and information sessions regarding the proposal for the MDF brought forward a number of comments that it may be difficult to release staff to participate in the proposed training days. We also received comments that there appears to be a deficit of interest in releasing staff for development, and that priority appears to be given to Community Safety work and a regular schedule of business meetings that it is felt must be attended. For any agreed future development pathway to be successful it will be necessary for the senior leadership staff across the Service to buy into the outputs and outcomes that are being sought and to actively advocate for participation from their teams.
205. The proposal for the MDF is for three training days, facilitated by the current Organisational Development (OD) Talent Development Team (TDT), which would be supplemented by a planned group of local facilitators and subject matter experts (SME). There is however a concern that rather than creating capacity via the facilitators and SMEs that there would simply be a reduction in available capacity in other areas of the organisation. It is our view that capacity is not simply created, but rather redistributed with potential negative impacts elsewhere. The current governance proposal sets out a two track approach to delivery for the MDF. Track 1 would focus on newly promoted personnel with these expected to number circa 290 in 2025, and approximately 167 per year up to 2030. Track 2 would be a parallel process to deal with the existing 2,250 personnel in the supervisory management group who have been identified as having not received SFRS leadership/management training to the desired level. To achieve these numbers, it is envisaged that the SFRS will need to fully develop the MDF beyond pilot and concept stage, would need to make the necessary budgetary commitments, and also ensure that the required levels of capacity for facilitators and candidates is ring fenced. In maintaining this approach, It appears clear that the SFRS will find it difficult to ever catch up with the ongoing deficit of those personnel who require a consistent level of input for both managerial functional training and leadership theory and practice. This is applicable for the current managers and future leaders of the Service.
206. We understand that there has been a reluctance for some at strategic levels within the Service to commit to a 'one size fits all' to management and leadership development of their staff. However given the recent paucity in delivery of this important development training, HMFSI would suggest that the 2,250 staff group who are awaiting input, as well as an expected 1,125 promoted personnel in the coming years up to 2030, should be considered for placement into a preexisting pathway that will ensure a consistent foundational level of learning for this group. At this time the SFRS has placed a limited number of officers onto the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) Middle Managers Leadership programme

at a licence cost of circa £55 per candidate. The NFCC also has in place a Supervisory Leadership Development Pathway that would be accessible at a similar cost per candidate, and which would allow the current deficit to be addressed in a meaningful timescale. As we have noted earlier, there has in recent years been an annual underspend of budget for LNA identified training. In the last year this amounted to approximately £75,000. This budget underspend would go a considerable way to closing the supervisory and the middle manager development gap. It was reported to us that the NFCC pathways do not fully deliver all of the development needs that the SFRS would seek for their personnel, however it is our view that the limited resources of the OD TDT may be better suited to designing and delivering the supplementary training modules that the Service consider necessary for a range of management topics to be delivered.

Recommendation 37



The SFRS should consider the utilisation of current NFCC Supervisory and Middle Manager development pathways as a means to close the leadership and management training delivery deficit gap.

207. Having spoken to SFRS personnel within TSA and the OD TDT, we are of the opinion that positive outcomes could be achieved by a closer alignment or amalgamation of the elements of their work that are focused on training and development. Failing to have this alignment leaves too much opportunity to fully put in place a holistic training and development pathway for the Service's current and future leaders and managers. Placing both of these groups together, both of which are seeking similar outcomes regarding the ongoing training and career long development of personnel, under a single source of guidance and direction of travel reduces the potential for essential elements of the work to slip between the corporate gaps that will exist between two bodies. The structural make up of TSA and OD should be considered to achieve the aims of the strategy for learning and development.

Recommendation 38



The SFRS should review the training and organisational development outcomes that it is seeking for developing existing leaders and managers, and then consider if the existing structures and separation between TSA and OD will allow these to be achieved. If necessary structural change should be considered to achieve strategy planned outcomes for OD.

208. We received a number of comments about a perceived opaqueness regarding the system that is in place for the allocation of development courses. Many staff believe that you simply have to be in the right place at the right time. Course allocations are linked via personal appraisals and the LNA process within the Service. In relation to appraisals, we found that staff, including those responsible for compiling and producing the required reports, were either very dismissive of the value of them or could state that they saw genuine value in them. We received many comments that appraisals "were a complete waste of time" but also that they were valuable and that they enabled staff to access training courses that they requested. Our survey asked, 'Do you have access to the development (and career progression) opportunities you would like?'. Given the comments we received regarding access to development courses and to the appraisals system it is unsurprising that only 46% responded positively. Such is the importance of this particular topic that the Chief Inspector has elected to carry out an in-depth thematic inspection of training and operational development within the SFRS. This thematic inspection will commence in April 2025.

Managing Performance

209. During our fieldwork across the NSDA there was clear evidence that watches felt very supported within their stations and by their SCs. While the SC may not be a day-to-day presence on stations, particularly for the On Call and more remote stations, it was

generally acknowledged that they were easily contactable and were quick to answer queries and offer support and intervention as required. There was a view that more senior officers within the LSO structures were less well known, but that their more occasional visits to stations were valued as it gave an insight into a more strategic appreciation of the ongoing work of the Service. It was felt that levels of contact with SFRS principal level managers and officers was very infrequent and that this made it difficult to relate to the corporate Service who felt very far removed from life at local stations and other SDA locations. As we have mentioned elsewhere within this report, the frequency of turnover of FDOs is a source of frustration for local operational crews in particular. Many stated that it takes time for effective working relationships to form, and that this is often curtailed as officers can move between posts or into retirement with regular ongoing frequency. This view was particularly strong amongst operational personnel who serve in island stations.

210. The issues observed during our fieldwork interviews and commented on in the previous paragraph are supported by our Survey. We asked the question ‘Do you feel valued and supported by your management team, how would you rate this?’ The mean average rating for this question was 7.36 in the NSDA, compared to 6.70 in the WSDA, and 6.87 in the ESDA. However, it is valuable to interrogate response levels for this survey question. If we aggregate the top three satisfaction scores, marked from 7 to 10, we have a total response of 71%. If we consider the bottom three satisfaction scores, marked 1 to 3, we have a total response of 9%. These survey responses confirmed the narrative answers that we received across the North, that personnel feel very supported and valued on their watch, and well supported by their designated SCs and wider LSO team. Many respondents commented that their managers had high and competing workloads and understood if the support they received was not always face to face, but any queries that they had were dealt with quickly via a range of communications methods. While local support was confirmed as being in place and valued, many respondents and interviewees told us that they felt much less supported by corporate
- level senior officers and managers who were viewed as being distant from local issues.
211. During the course of our fire station interviews in particular, we did not find a deep understanding or application of governance processes that linked the Services strategic plans all the way to individual firefighter’s appraisals by way of the classic golden thread. Where this approach was understood and used, it was as we have stated earlier, done to commendably high levels. We did find that appraisals for individuals across the NSDA were being completed, but for many the most common descriptor for them was as a “tick box exercise”. Appraisals were, judged via interview responses, seen as possibly enabling access to training if that was requested, but many considered these requests as likely to be part of the Service’s cyclical refresher programmes such as driver training and would have been granted as part of normal business. While there are many instances of training requests being made via appraisals for personal development purposes, our interviewees told us that these requests were often not followed up by training course placements despite multiple requests.
212. Administration support for the NSDA is provided via a group of individuals from the national admin support pool. We found this group for the NSDA to be proactive in their approach, and keen to engage with their work in supporting the SDA functions. It was a concern however to learn that as other functions within the SFRS reduce their in house admin teams to redistribute the realised capacity into other more senior or managerial posts, that the work that they would previously have undertaken now falls to the central administration team. While this clearly increases workload for the administration team, it also embeds them further in generalist roles. An unintended consequence of this is that many within this team cannot be moved up to higher grades within the SFRS job grading system with the consequential loss of potential future earnings. The removal of admin support was a cause for concern that was raised in many of our interviews in a number of different areas, some of which we have set out in this report earlier, i.e. for the On Call recruitment tracker system management,

within Organisational Development and for course allocation management for TSA. While it is for every Directorate to shape its capacity and workforce to meet its own particular need, when any reorganisation is undertaken it should be done with a clear understanding of the impacts of the change not only for the group reorganising, but also for those other groups who may be impacted and who may need to pick up work that would previously been completed by those who were in roles that are removed.

213. Within the NSDA, and specifically considering HR related matters and support for officers and managers from experts in the field, there were concerns raised to us that a sufficient level of support from the People Directorate was not available. Following the restructure of People, as we have previously mentioned, we were told that there appears to be less business partners available and less functional support to assist with the SDA's needs. While the NSDA understands that the People Directorate has challenges it must meet, there was a feeling relayed to our inspection team that the needs of the SDA were not being met. As we understand it, these concerns have been raised internally within the Service, but no feedback was forthcoming.
214. Within the NSDA we found a consistent approach to the management of business meetings from SDA level down. Agendas, action and issues logs are regularly produced to capture ongoing work. The adoption of a single sheet four box reporting system was found across the SDA down to and including some fire stations. This 'quadrant' approach has helped with the standardisation of governance across the SDA which in turn has helped ensure that the corporate messaging coming into the NSDA can be filtered down through all levels, including to fire stations.

Good Practice 10



The Quadrant reporting system has added to consistency of reporting and messaging of information across the NSDA.

Decision Making Governance Within the SFRS

215. It was a widely held view that decision making authority for the SFRS was too invested in the SLT and that the managerial decision-making capacity for SDA (and Directorate) officers was not properly utilised. A common theme that came up during interviews was the comparison in decision-making authority during the Covid pandemic period with that which operated before and after that time. Many noted that despite the very tough conditions that presented themselves during Covid, that agile and devolved decision making was made locally and much more quickly due to a more streamlined approach to governance. Following the Covid period there was a return to the regular governance and decision-making approaches used by the SFRS, and it was felt that this slowed decision making and stifled innovation. Officers told us that it was frustrating that they are "allowed to make critical decisions in my fire kit at operational incidents, but not in the office when dressed in my shirt".
216. When setting up information gathering or decision making groups within the SFRS we believe that it is necessary to have relevant stakeholders, from both uniformed and support staff personnel, across a range of diverse duty patterns, in order to achieve an optimal level of representation from across the Service. These balanced groups should have the skills and knowledge relevant to the subject being considered, and thus will be more enabled to achieve agreed outcomes. It is a concern that there may be group polarisation caused by under representation of some staff, with decision makers coming from the same workforce population groups who may confirm their own decision-making biases, and that this may limit variety in decision making, which could stifle innovation. There is a concern that the Service is failing to fully use the management and leadership knowledge of the biggest group that is available to it i.e. its uniformed officer cadre below Principal officer level. It is also possible that this may lead to a lack of diversity in decision making due to them often being made by the same small groups within the Service. Officers in the NSDA felt that their ability to make impactful decisions was and is limited by reduced levels

of autonomy granted by the corporate SFRS, and by a lack of meaningful budget to do so. Within the SDA many officers did inform us that they felt enabled to act locally to improve the services offered, but that a lack of budgetary control also affected this.

Local Governance, Communications and Engagement

Equality and Diversity

217. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Framework requires that the 'SFRS should also seek to be an organisation that is more representative of the people and communities that it serves.' As part of their continual training, firefighters complete a diversity training package. The SFRS has a mandatory Professional Behaviours and Equality online module which staff are required to complete on the LCMS platform. The module retains a three year currency for personnel. It highlights the expectations and legal requirements of employees, relating to fulfilling their obligations for equality and diversity, along with what employees can expect from the SFRS in how it meets its obligations. The module also explains to employees' concepts of equality, diversity, inclusion and human rights and why these are relevant to their job.
218. 8.82% of the total number of NSDA staff, including support staff, identify themselves as female, while 91.18% identify as male. However, the breakdown varies across the different roles, duty systems and geographical areas. For example, for WT firefighters the split is 92.04% male and 7.96% female, for On Call RDS 92.18% are male and 7.82% female, for On Call Volunteers 87.14% are male with 12.86% female. For support staff it is 53.85% male and 46.15% female. Within the constituent LA areas that make up the NSDA, based on estimates from the National Records of Scotland, women make up an average of 51.03% of the local population while men make up the remaining 48.97%.
219. Since 2018-19 the SFRS has been publishing demographic statistics for new entrants and as part of its recruitment process the Service nationally is trying to improve the diversity of its workforce by trying to attract currently underrepresented groups. Nationally the Service aspires to have a workforce which is more representative of the people and communities of Scotland. The Service

published a Positive Action Strategy in 2019, which is currently being refreshed, with the aim of promoting the SFRS as an Employer of Choice to Scotland's diverse communities, to attract, recruit and retain people from underrepresented groups.

220. Whilst we accept this has proven to be a challenging area for the fire service to address, not only in Scotland, but across the world, the statistics above show that the SFRS has some way to go to deliver against its own aspirations. While this statistical information picture for the North is in keeping with what we found in both the West and East SDAs, we accept that control of this issue is largely a Service matter.

Wellbeing and Mental Health

221. Staff wellbeing is a priority of the SFRS and there is a range of support, for both physical and mental health available should it need to be accessed. During our inspection fieldwork across a range of site types, printed literature and information posters promoting the Service's mental health services were visible on notice boards. Station operational staff we spoke to were positive and complimentary about the support that was available to them via their local LSO officers following operational incidents or from the mental health services provided by external partners. HMFSI published a thematic inspection report in 2023 that examined the mental health and wellbeing support available to all Service personnel. It was encouraging to note during our interviews that there appears to be an increased and growing knowledge and awareness of the Post Incident Support Process (PISP), which is central to the mental health support offer that is made by the SFRS to its operational staff.
222. Sickness absence levels within the NSDA has been reasonably static within most workforce duty groups per the tables below. There was a noticeable rise in absence rates in the 2021-22 year, which is consistent across the NSDA staff group figures and may be COVID related. It is noticeable that the WT absence percentage and days lost rose through the Covid period, but has remained consistently higher for a couple of years following that time. For the year 2022-23, the WT absence rate of 6.21% is roughly in line with the WSDA at 6.63% and the ESDA absence rate of 6.64%.

The absence rate for NSDA FDOs at 3.57% sits between the higher WSDA figure which is 4.74% and the lower ESDA figure of 2.99%. For the year 2022-23, the absence rate for On Call RDS is 3.45% which is lower

than both the WSDA at 5.27% and the ESDA at 4.14%. The absence rate for support staff at 2.31% in the NSDA is noticeably different for that in the WSDA at 5.36% and for the ESDA at 8.09%

Wholetime		
Year	Average days lost	Absence %
2020-2021	4.67	3.20
2021-2022	10.81	7.56
2022-2023	8.31	6.21
2023-2024	8.31	5.96

Table 5

Flexi Duty FDO		
Year	Average days lost	Absence %
2020-2021	5.83	3.17
2021-2022	6.40	3.40
2022-2023	5.68	3.57
2023-2024	4.89	2.62

Table 6

On Call RDS		
Year	Average days lost	Absence %
2020-2021	7.62	2.26
2021-2022	12.51	3.76
2022-2023	11.57	3.45
2023-2024	10.19	3.06

Table 7

On Call Volunteer		
Year	Average days lost	Absence %
2020-2021	2.39	0.77
2021-2022	1.08	0.32
2022-2023	0.85	0.25
2023-2024	0.52	0.15

Table 8

Support Staff		
Year	Average days lost	Absence %
2020-2021	2.48	1.35
2021-2022	10.19	6.70
2022-2023	7.70	4.01
2023-2024	3.68	2.31

Table 9

223. As with the West and East SDA reports, the NSDA had wide variances in the levels of absences across its personnel groups and across its four LSO areas. Absence is a key performance indicator (KPI) for the Service and as such is closely monitored. Where staff absences do occur, the SFRS has long established policies and processes to deal with it and to assist personnel to return to the workplace. We asked managers about their experiences of dealing with these policies and processes and what support they have in doing so. It is clear from the answers that we received back that the level of support that individual managers receive varies quite widely. We had instances where WCs in fire stations would tell us that they received good support from partners in the People Directorate when dealing with absence issues, however the most common response was that they were left in the main to manage the process with little or limited support.

224. As stated previously within this report, the majority of the managers that we spoke to told us that they have not received significant managerial training in recent years, and this includes for the management of absence. Many have become self-taught through necessity, with a level of expertise built up over time. It would be inaccurate to say that no support has been in place for managers, but we believe that it is fair to state that the level of support is not to a consistent high standard across the SDA. Where support has been in place, it was valued by those managers who had received it. Many without support however have felt frustrated to the point that it has significantly and negatively impacted their overall work balance as managers. In previous years automated Managing Attendance Systems would have been available for managers to utilise when dealing with personnel absences, this is not

the case at this time within the SFRS. Trigger points for absence have to be manually initiated, and managers across the Service utilise a variety of means for doing so e.g. keeping a hard copy journal, maintaining personal IT based spread sheets etc. What many appear to find daunting is the preparation and composition of the necessary administrative correspondence that periods of absence will generate between managers and those who are on sick or absence leave.

225. As we have set out earlier, the OD function of the Service has introduced pilots for a consistent approach to managerial training to be delivered to supervisory managers across the SFRS. While this move towards a consistent approach is welcomed, the pace at which it is being delivered is slow when set against the need that we have set out previously within this report. We were informed of SDA/LSO based managerial training that has been organised and delivered “as there is nothing coming from the People Directorate”. Those who had received such training were appreciative of it and gave positive endorsements for it. The criticism however is that it is not delivered in a consistent manner to all of the managers who may need it across the NSDA and the wider SFRS. Organisational Training and Development will be considered in more detail by us in a thematic inspection that launches in June 2025.



Recommendation 39

The Service should consider the training requirements for managers across the SDAs that would equip them with the necessary skills to perform their role. Support from People Directorate partners for this purpose should be redefined and agreed.

226. There are systems and processes in place for personnel to access support from occupational health professionals, through either self-referral or by being referred by Service managers or health and wellbeing professional staff. Across the NSDA for the twelve month period to the end of March 2024, there were 243 referral cases. The most common reason for referral were musculoskeletal injury (53%), work-related stress (23%), other miscellaneous reasons (21%) and for mental health related matters (3%). Whilst the percentage levels of referrals for the NSDA varies to those for the West and East SDAs, the reasons for them are in the same order of ranking.

Health and Safety

227. One of the Service’s core values is safety and is underpinned by a Safety and Assurance Strategy. The Service aims to promote a positive safety culture. There is national performance reporting and trend analysis for key indicators covering, for example, accident and near miss statistics. The view of staff we spoke to was that the new system, ‘Think Act Stay Safe’ (TASS), used for recording health and safety events and near misses was an improvement on the previous RIVO system. However, despite it being a better user experience, we were informed that the level of detail required remains onerous. As can be seen in Table 10, accident, injury and near miss numbers have increased over the last three reporting years, which is a reverse of the trend that was observed in the East and West SDA reports recently published by HMFSI. It is encouraging to note the significant rise in near miss reporting over the period. Near miss reporting can help prevent future accidents and injury, mitigate risk, raise awareness of workplace hazards and makes for a more informed workforce.

	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	Total
Accident/Injury	25	28	35	88
Near Miss	36	18	83	137
Acts of Violence	17	10	4	31

Table 10 NSDA Accident and Injury, Near Miss, Acts of Violence

228. Table 10 also shows a significant drop in reports of Acts of Violence (AOV) directed towards SFRS personnel in the NSDA over the three year reporting period. Over the reporting periods for the East and West SDA reports, notable increases in AOV were recorded. The 76% reduction has been achieved over three years, and coincides with concerted CSE youth focused activity in the NSDA over that period. While any AOV is one act too many, it is clear that the efforts undertaken by the CSE team and local station personnel who have engaged with local young people have been successful to date.

Recommendations and Good Practice

Recommendation 1: The SFRS should engage with fire station staff to ensure that the importance of the Good Governance Framework, and how it should be used to guide their work at a local level (including appraisals) and also provide linkages to Service strategic plans, is understood by all staff. This is particularly important for Watch Officers who need to manage local work outputs and outcomes, and who will be the middle and strategic level managers of the future.

Recommendation 2: The SFRS should work with partners to develop and implement an evaluation system that scores and grades the inputs, outputs and outcomes of the many CS initiatives that it undertakes. This evaluation system should allow qualified decisions on where, and on what, initiatives to focus the resources of the Service.

Recommendation 3: The SFRS should consider the current arrangements that allows external funding for initiatives to be brought into the Service with a view to streamlining them to facilitate these financial inflows. These processes should consider the entry of external funding as well as the most appropriate value for money route to spending which maximises outcomes.

Recommendation 4: The SFRS should engage with Information Governance, CAT, LALO, PP&P and operational personnel to review how Firefighter safety critical Information should be recorded and then disseminated following HFSVs. This should be done as a matter of urgency.

Recommendation 5: The SFRS should produce national STL guidance for use across the Service SDAs. They should produce national STL governance documents for issue to licence applicants that makes clear the role of the SFRS and the primary role of the LA issuer. The SFRS should engage LAs to allow a common understanding of the role that both parties play in the issuing of STL licences.

Recommendation 6: The Service should consider how best to plan for any reduction in FTE in geographically isolated stations such as Inverness when personnel are drafted in to fill temporary vacancies.

Recommendation 7: The Service should continue to explore and use innovative approaches to ensure the availability of On Call operational

responses and should consider the merits of these innovations and actively seek to use current governance processes to facilitate them.

Recommendation 8: The SFRS should continue to develop its successful use of On Call Support personnel. The use of this approach could be considered for extension to other roles such as Crew Commander and firefighter, who could perform elements of work currently undertaken by OCSWCs, thus freeing them up for more impactful management focused work.

Recommendation 11: The SFRS Assets Team should consider and introduce a communications and engagement process that ensures that staff at SDA, LSO and station level are informed of property upgrade works that are planned or are in progress.

Recommendation 10: Assets should review the age and condition of its spare appliance fleet and make provision to reduce and improve it as new vehicles enter service making less aged appliances available.

Recommendation 11: The SFRS should conduct a review of fleet maintenance options and consider if added value and cost savings can be made. They should consider any added benefits that could be achieved through delivering a minor repairs serviced via local garage establishments in remote and island locations.

Recommendation 12: A Command Support Unit is a critical appliance for the successful management of operational incidents. The current arrangements for temporary CSUs are unsuitable and the new units should be brought into service as soon as is practicable.

Recommendation 13: The SFRS should review the effectiveness of EV in more remote areas of Scotland. They should consider the charging infrastructure that is necessary to support the use of these vehicles, and local access to charging facilities when they are not located on Service premises. Where necessary, to ensure operational readiness, combustion engine vehicles should be strategically placed for use by SFRS personnel.

Recommendation 14: The Service should review the suitability of PPE for personnel who are not from designated wildfire stations, but who are

known to provide significant capacity in any response to these incidents. Currently firefighters can access strategic stocks of spare PPE, if necessary, the SFRS should follow a similar route to ensure that personnel who are mobilised to these incidents are dressed to the same standard as their designated station colleagues.

Recommendation 15: Assets should consider the process for the repair or replacement of kit and equipment and introduce a system that gives regular feedback to station based personnel regarding the progress or any delays in the repair or replacement of kit and equipment.

Recommendation 16: While we acknowledge the development of a newsletter by the Assets team, there is a need to actively engage with NSDA personnel on a range of matters. The Assets team should consider, and where necessary review its communications and engagement with the SDAs with a view to informing them of ongoing work and progress across a range of issues. Engagement should be systematic and inclusive to ensure station based issues are able to be resolved and that all partners are informed of progress.

Recommendation 17: Assets should consider and design a process for business case presentation for the issue of equipment to the level of a WT station appliance. These cases should be reviewed at an appropriate level and the outcomes clearly communicated back to the SDA, LSO and fire station involved.

Recommendation 18: The Service should review the system for collection and return of firefighting PPE laundry. The aim should be to identify opportunities to reduce lost time within the end to end system and to make PPE available for use by operational fire crews as soon as possible. A communication and engagement process should be planned and undertaken to explain the full process to operational personnel.

Recommendation 19: The SFRS should consider the best and most appropriate management structure to address the fundamental management oversight weaknesses of the OCs. Staff should be fully engaged and opinions considered. FDOs should be canvassed for best practice views that can be worked into any final proposal.

Recommendation 20: The Service should design and introduce site-specific plans for the OCs, similar to fire station plans, which align to SFRS governance and planning frameworks. Alongside these plans, the OC function should have a

workplace audit process designed and modelled on a station audit to allow a full review of the workplace and its processes. The outcomes of the audits should be reported back to the individual sites and any issues raised made the subject of an action/improvement plan.

Recommendation 21: The SFRS should work to ensure that the DOC staff group are actively engaged and communicated with to build evermore positive working relationships.

Recommendation 22: The SFRS should consider how best to reflect the known reality of managing operational incidents using the ICS at remote locations or on islands across Scotland. This should be reflected in the ICS Policy text.

Recommendation 23: The NSDA should actively engage with its local emergency service partners and deliver input on the role of the SFRS at incidents. Partner roles and mutual support should also be clearly set out.

Recommendation 24: The SFRS should review its role within the resilience and response planning process for large scale energy renewable systems and similar which could present operational challenges for its crews in future. The Service should put in place a system that allows for the notification of new projects and appropriate processes that would enable the initiation of any response planning, training or future equipment that may be required to meet these challenges.

Recommendation 25: The SFRS should actively engage the owners of Whisky distilleries in the NSDA to discuss risk details and ownership in the event of an incident at their sites.

Recommendation 26: The ongoing planning within the SFRS to reintroduce Tactical Ship Firefighting courses should include consideration of the need that presents itself in the NSDA.

Recommendation 27: The Service is involved in a wide range of intervention activity with LA partners. This work aligns to the aims set out in LOIPs and tackles the priorities of both the LAs and the SFRS. We would recommend that these interventions are subject to robust evaluation that quantifies the outputs and outcomes that they achieve, thus ensuring the ability to direct resources most appropriately for future joint planned activities.

Recommendation 28: The Service should strengthen the connection between LSO teams and operational staff and the Civil Contingency

and resilience teams. Efforts should be made to understand the local emerging operational risks to ensure that suitable procedures can be developed for them and training can be designed to test their adequacy.

Recommendation 29: The SFRS should review the reasons for On Call course cancellations and where possible put in place appropriate solutions to minimise such occurrences.

Recommendation 30: The SFRS should review the administrative capacity that is available for the efficient and effective management of the On Call Tracker system. This review should include seeking the views of those who manage the Tracker within the People Directorate and those who act as recruitment managers in the SDAs. If necessary additional capacity should be made available for this small team.

Recommendation 31: The People Directorate should reengage with SDA personnel who have responsibility for local recruitment and user management of the Tracker system to fully set out its use for optimal outcomes.

Recommendation 32: The Service should review the entry standards for personnel applying to join the On Call with a view to introducing a range of metrics that support the entry of candidates from smaller demographic pools.

Recommendation 33: The Service should consider if the current administrative capacity for the allocation and management of TTM and follow on courses for On Call trainees is suitable and sufficient. If necessary, additional capacity should be introduced with a view to facilitating courses and making trainees available for operational deployment.

Recommendation 34: We recommend that the NSDA reviews its delivery of Core Skill TFC training with improvement in levels of attainment at On Call RDS and Volunteer stations considered a priority.

Recommendation 35: We recommend that the Service reviews the delivery of its Core Skills National Refresher programme and works toward achieving its stated levels of attainment. Attainment levels for On Call Volunteers should be treated as a priority.

Recommendation 36: We recommend that the Service reviews the delivery model for its Specialist Skills National Refresher programme, and works

toward achieving its stated levels of attainment for those areas that are currently deficient.

Recommendation 37: The SFRS should consider the utilisation of current NFCC Supervisory and Middle Manager development pathways as a means to close the leadership and management training delivery deficit gap.

Recommendation 38: The SFRS should review the training and organisational development outcomes that it is seeking for developing existing leaders and managers, and then consider if the existing structures and separation between TSA and OD will allow these to be achieved. If necessary structural change should be considered to achieve strategy planned outcomes for OD.

Recommendation 39: The Service should consider the training requirements for managers across the SDAs that would equip them with the necessary skills to deal with absence management. Support from People Directorate partners for this purpose should be redefined and agreed.

Good Practice 1: An example of the important and value adding work that is undertaken by CSA, CAT, and LALO teams was on an island that has no fire station (of which there are six within WIOS). One individual formed a partnership approach with the local GP to gain an insight to the people living within this community. Of the 94 properties on the island, 49 had elderly residents who had a range of vulnerabilities. Each elderly resident household on the island was subsequently visited and a HFSV carried out, with important safety messaging shared and vulnerabilities noted.

Good Practice 2: The Service recently introduced a change the STL licencing process, to emphasises the 'advisory' role played by SFRS in the process, is a positive move that should reduce the capacity that is required for this function.

Good Practice 3: Personnel have been placed on training courses to allow them to gain Fire Safety modules qualifications in advance of them joining PPP as FSEOs. This learning is supported by time allowances by the Service.

Good Practice 4: The use of the Operational Intelligence System to log and make Site-Specific Information that is gathered during HFSVs accessible to operational crews via appliance Getac tablets is a good example of innovation.

Good Practice 5: The introduction of fire stations that have decontamination infrastructure fully

integrated into their fabric is a positive step forward for the SFRS. These new facilities have been well received by the personnel who utilise them.

Good Practice 6: Additional structural firefighting PPE stocks have been provided by the SFRS as a result of an identified need and following significant capital investment.

Good Practice 7: The introduction of the new On Call contract arrangements is positive and should offer greater degrees of flexibility for the existing personnel in the group, and for future firefighters that may be able to commit to the new terms.

Good Practice 8: HMFSI note the increase in attainment levels for the Core Skills National Refresher training programme.

Good Practice 9: An initiative to allocate dates for training courses for On Call trainees following TTM has been a success in parts of the NSDA. The SFRS should consider and where possible replicate the initiative and its outcomes.

Good Practice 10: The Quadrant reporting system has added to consistency of reporting and messaging of information across the NSDA.

Appendix A: About His Majesty's Fire Service Inspectorate in Scotland (HMFSI)

HMFSI is a body that operates within, but independently of, the Scottish Government. Inspectors have the scrutiny powers specified in Section 43B of the Act. These include inquiring into the state and efficiency of the SFRS, its compliance with Best Value, and the manner in which it is carrying out its functions.

HMFSI Inspectors may, in carrying out inspections, assess whether the SFRS is complying with its duty to secure Best Value and continuous improvement. If necessary, Scottish Ministers can direct Inspectors to look into anything relating to the SFRS as they consider appropriate.

We also have an established role in providing professional advice and guidance on the emergency response, legislation and education in relation to the Fire and Rescue Service in Scotland.

Our powers give latitude to investigate areas we consider necessary or expedient for the purposes of, or in connection with, the carrying out of our functions:

- The SFRS must provide us with such assistance and co-operation as we may require enabling us to carry out our functions.
- When we publish a report, the SFRS must also have regard to what we have found and take such measures, if any, as it thinks fit.
- Where our report identifies that the SFRS is not efficient or effective (or Best Value not secured), or will, unless remedial measures are taken, cease to be efficient or effective, Scottish Ministers may direct the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to take such measures as may be required. The SFRS must comply with any direction given.

We work with other Inspectorates and agencies across the public sector and co-ordinate our activities to reduce the burden of inspection and avoid unnecessary duplication. We aim to add value and strengthen public confidence in the SFRS and do this through independent scrutiny and evidence-led reporting about what we find. Where we make recommendations in a report, we will follow them up to assess the level of progress.

We will aim to identify and promote good practice that can be applied across Scotland. Our approach is to support the SFRS to deliver services that are high quality, continually improving, effective and responsive to local and national needs. The terms of reference for inspections are consulted upon and agreed with parties that the Chief Inspector deems relevant.

Appendix B: How this inspection was carried out

The purpose of this inspection is to examine the effectiveness of Service Delivery by the SFRS within its North SDA.

An inquiry by the Inspectorate can be self-directed or can be subject to direction by Scottish Ministers. This inquiry into the SFRS is self-directed by the Chief Inspector, Robert Scott QFSM.

The following persons also contributed to the Inspection and to the report:

John Joyce QFSM, Assistant Inspector

David Young, Assistant Inspector

Graeme Fraser, Assistant Inspector

Brian McKenzie, Assistant Inspector

Calum Bruce, Inspection Support Manager

Lynne Gow, Group Commander (SFRS secondee)

Shirley Hartridge, Project Manager (SFRS secondee)

Methodology

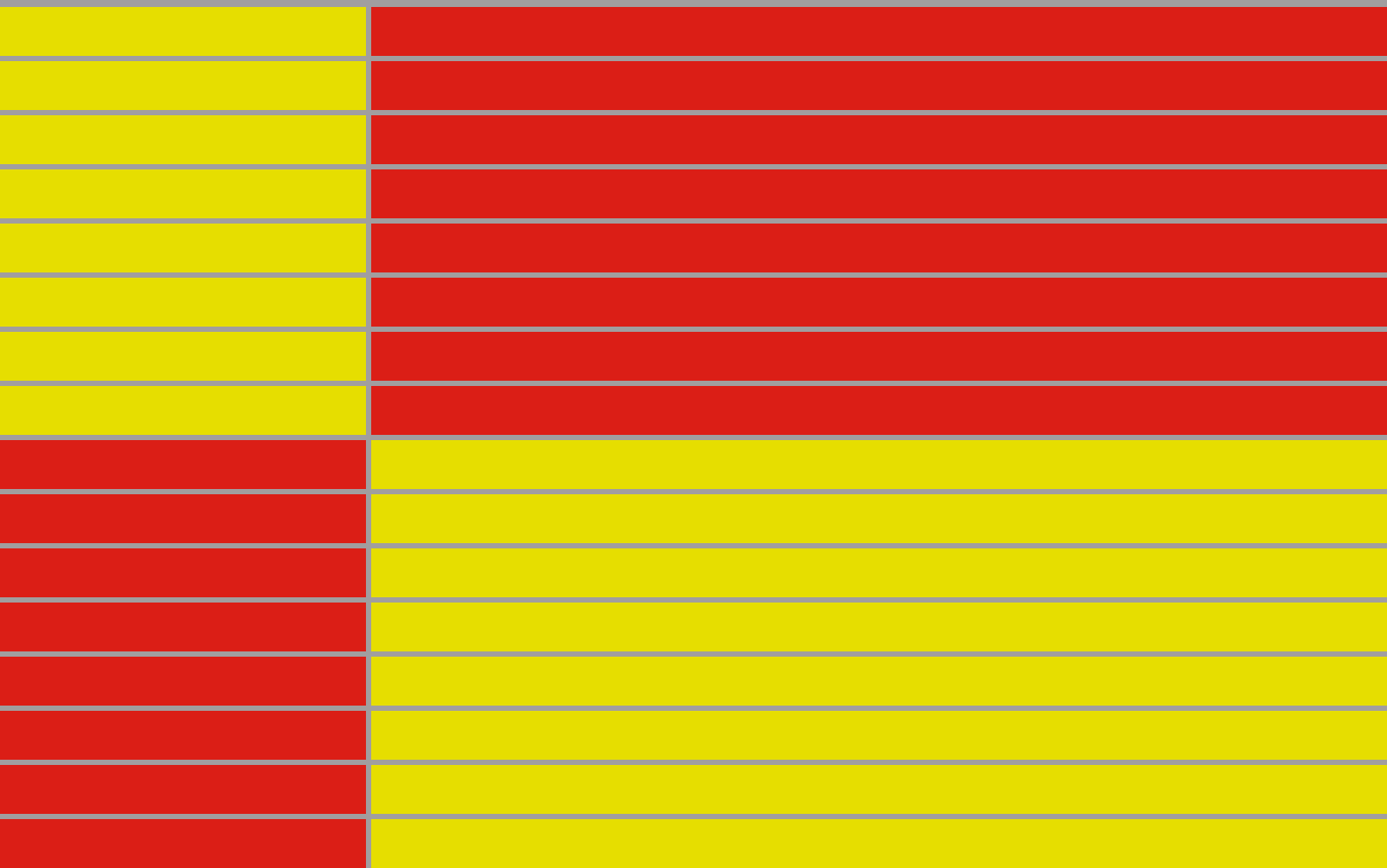
This inspection has involved a number of different methods of evidence gathering and analysis:

- A desk top data review of documents and data supplied by the SFRS. We undertook a sense check and assessment of the content of procedural documents.
- A number of face-to-face and virtual interviews with SFRS staff who are responsible for the provision of, management, and training necessary for service delivery.
- A sample examination of SFRS equipment, premises and records held at fire stations in the West.
- In person and virtual meetings with Partners of the SFRS.
- An anonymous survey of all SFRS staff based within the NSDA.
- Observation of development, training and exercising sessions within the NSDA.

Glossary of Terms

ACAM	Aberdeen city, Aberdeenshire, Angus and Moray	FSEO	Fire Safety Enforcement Officer
AO	Auditing Officer	5WDS	Five Watch Duty System
AOV	Act of Violence	GC	Group Commander
ARC	Asset Resource Centre	GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
BA	Breathing Apparatus	GP	General Practitioner
BCP	Business Continuity Planning	HazMat	Hazardous Material
BESS	Battery Energy Storage Site	HFSV	Home Fire Safety Visit
BIDS	SFRS Business Intelligence & Data Services Team	HMFSI	His Majesty's Fire Service Inspectorate
CAR	Community Asset Register	HRU	Heavy Rescue Unit
CAT	Community Action Team	HSE	Health and Safety Executive
CC	Crew Commander	HVP	High Volume Pump
CCO	Civil Contingencies Officer	ICL	Incident Command Level
CNI	Critical National Infrastructure	ICS	Incident Command System
COMAH	Control of Major Accident Hazards	KPI	Key Performance Indicator
CPD	Continuous Professional Development	L1	A level one incident
CPP	Community Planning Partnership	LA	Local Authority
CRR	Community Risk Register	LALO	Local Authority Liaison Officer
CS	Community Safety	LCMS	Learning Content Management System
CSE	Community Safety Engagement	LEDP	Local Enforcement Delivery Plan
CSET	Community Safety Engagement Tool	LFRP	Local Fire and Rescue Plan
CSU	Command Support Unit	LGV	Large Goods Vehicle
DACO	Deputy Assistant Chief Officer	LNA	Learning Needs Analysis
DIM	Detection, Identification and Monitoring	LOIP	Local Outcome Improvement Plan
DOC	Dundee Operations Control	LPDP	Local Prevention Delivery Plan
ESDA	East Service Delivery Area	LRP	Local Resilience Partnership
ESP	Electronic Stability Programme	LSO	Local Senior Officer
EV	Electric Vehicle	MDF	Management Development Framework
FBU	Fire Brigades Union	MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
FDO	Flexi Duty Officer	NFCC	National Fire Chiefs Council
FTE	Full Time Equivalent	NHS	National Health Service
		NIP	National Instructor Pool

NSDA	North Service Delivery Area	SLT	Strategic Leadership Team
NTC	National Training Centre	SME	Subject Matter Expert
OA	Operational Assurance	SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
OARRS	Operational Assurance Recording and Reporting System	SSI	Site-Specific Information
OC	Operations Control	SSRP	Strategic Service Review Programme
OCSWC	On Call Support Watch Commander	STL	Short Term Let
OD	Organisational Development	SWAH	Safe Working at Heights
OI	Operational Intelligence	TAP	Thematic Action Plan
PDF	Portable Document Format	TASS	Think Act Stay Safe
PDR	Personal Development Record	TDT	Talent Development Team
PISP	Post Incident Support Process	TfoC	Training for Competence
PKAD	Perth, Kinross and Dundee	The Act	The Fire (Scotland) Act 2005
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment	T&Cs	Terms and Conditions
P&P	Prevention and Protection	TOM	Target Operating Model
PPP	Prevention, Protection and Preparedness	TNA	Training Needs Analysis
PPED	Prevention and Protection Enforcement Database	TSA	Training Safety and Assurance
PREP	Pre-Recruitment Engagement Programme	TTM	Task and Task Management
PVG	Protecting Vulnerable Groups	UFAS	Unwanted Fire Alarm Signal
RAAC	Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete	UHLP	Ultra High Pressure Lance
RDS	Retained Duty System	UK	The United Kingdom
RRP	Regional Resilience Partnership	USAR	Urban Search and Rescue
RTC	Road Traffic Collision	VDS	Volunteer Duty System
SAMPE	Strategic Asset Management Plan - Equipment	WC	Watch Commander
SAMPF	Strategic Asset Management Plan - Fleet	WIOS	The Western Isles Orkney and Shetland
SAMPP	Strategic Asset Management Plan - Property	WSDA	West Service Delivery Area
SC	Station Commander	WT	Wholetime
SDA	Service Delivery Area		
SFRS	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service		
SLA	Service Level Agreement		



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