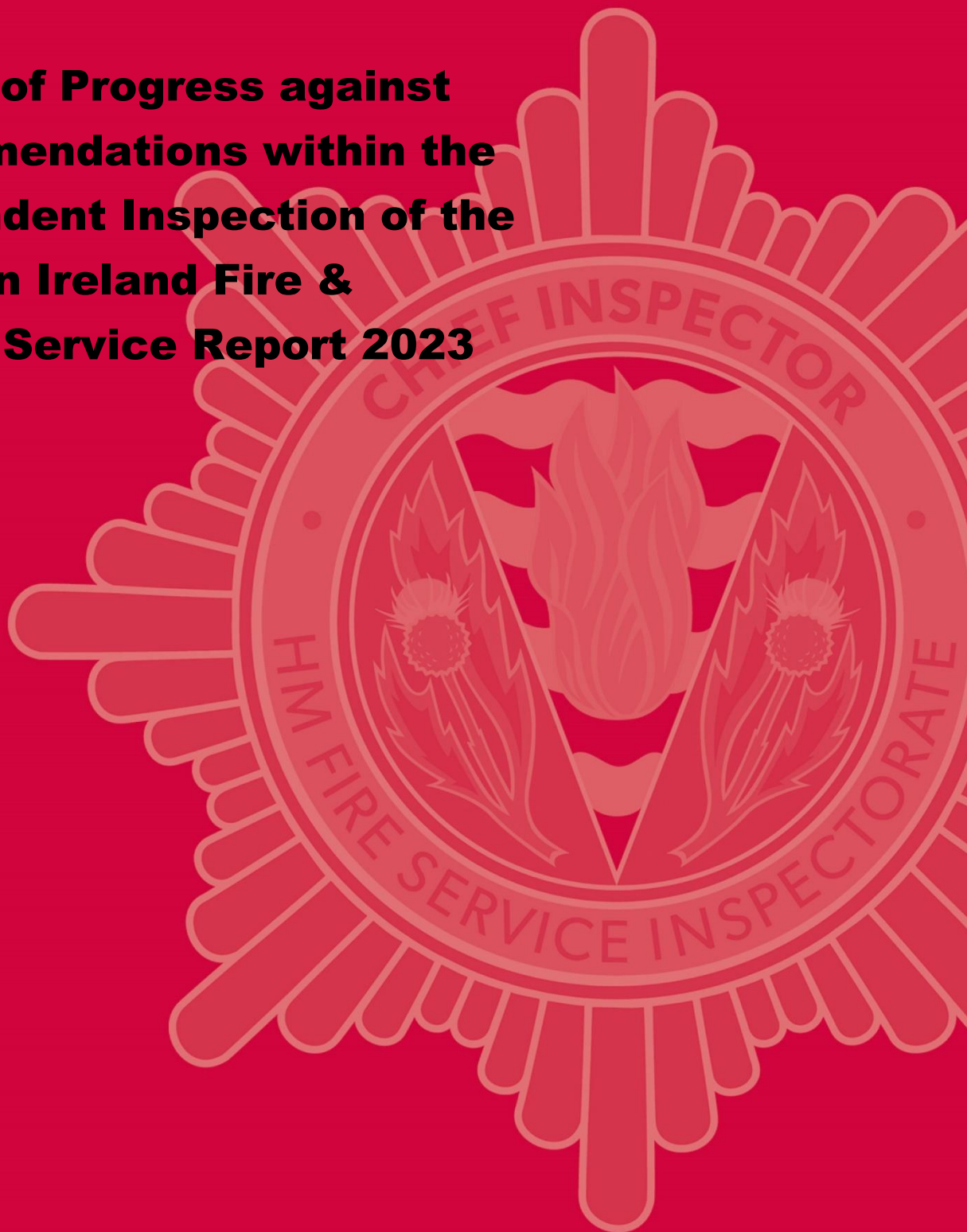




HM Fire Service Inspectorate

Review of Progress against Recommendations within the Independent Inspection of the Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service Report 2023



Integrity, Objectivity, and Fairness.

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FOREWORD

In September 2023, following a comprehensive independent inspection, HM Fire Service Inspectorate in Scotland (HMFSI) published a report that examined various aspects of the Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service (NIFRS).

As Chief Inspector of HM Fire Service Inspectorate in Scotland, I was honoured to lead this inspection and hoped that the report, and the recommendations contained within it, might act as a roadmap for the Service to follow on its journey of continuous improvement.

While the original report highlighted specific areas for development and raised concerns where necessary, it also acknowledged the strengths of this long-established and highly regarded public service. The inspection team was particularly struck by the openness and engagement of those interviewed. Their enthusiasm and evident pride in their organisation were clear, and this strengthened our commitment to helping the Service identify and address areas of concern. The issues identified were by no means unique to NIFRS.

We believed then—and continue to believe—that with strong leadership, political support, and appropriate financial investment, each of the challenges highlighted could be fully addressed.

Two years after the publication of the original report, I was delighted to be invited by the Department of Health (DoH) to return to NIFRS and review progress against the 11 recommendations contained in the original report. In commissioning, and engaging with, this follow-up review, the Department, the Board, and the Executive Leadership Team of NIFRS, have demonstrated a genuine willingness to share their journey, reflect on their successes, and openly discuss the challenges they have faced—and continue to face—in their efforts to improve the service they provide to the communities they protect. I commend those who made this decision and applaud the efforts of all involved over the past two years.

This inspection review aims to provide an independent assessment of the progress made, the improvements achieved, and the steps that remain. While it may be tempting to focus solely on what is yet to be done, it is equally important to acknowledge the significant progress made and to recognise those who have contributed to it.

NIFRS is a Service that is quite rightly held in high regard. It has protected the communities of Northern Ireland through challenging times, with integrity and honour. It is a Service that has shown a genuine desire to improve.

I sincerely hope that the work carried out by HMFSI will continue to support those tasked with delivering the Service, helping them to build on past successes and to meet future challenges, in order to provide the best possible service to the people of Northern Ireland.

Robert D Scott QFSM

HM Chief Inspector of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 His Majesty's Fire Service Inspectorate in Scotland (HMFSI) is a statutory body that operates within, but entirely independent of, the Scottish Government. The Inspectorate exists to provide independent, risk based, and proportionate professional inspection of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS). It performs an important role in the overall governance of the SFRS providing assurance to the Scottish Public and Ministers that the SFRS is working in an efficient and effective way, meeting its statutory responsibilities and delivering Best Value.
- 1.2 Northern Ireland does not have its own Fire Service Inspectorate, and whilst HMFSI has no statutory standing or powers in Northern Ireland, there is a long-established professional relationship between HMFSI and the Department of Health (DoH) in Northern Ireland, with HM Chief Inspector of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (The Chief Inspector) having been asked to provide advice to DoH on a number of occasions since this relationship was first established.
- 1.3 In June 2022, following concerns raised around the operation of the NIFRS, the DoH (supported by the Board of NIFRS) recognised the need for independent, experienced, professional scrutiny and commissioned the Chief Inspector to lead a formal inspection of NIFRS.
- 1.3 The final report was published in September 2023¹ and contained eleven recommendations and a number of areas for consideration by the DoH and the Board and Executive Leadership Team of NIFRS.
- 1.4 The report was accepted in its entirety and the recommendations were considered fully and work undertaken to deliver against these.
- 1.5 The original report was the product of a very thorough inspection carried out by a team of four subject matter experts who examined a range of relevant themes. The team worked tirelessly for over six months and visited every fire station in NIFRS and engaged with a full range of staff operating across a variety of functions in support of the Service.
- 1.6 It is important to stress that this review is not intended to replicate that work. It is instead provided to offer an independent view of progress made against the eleven recommendations in the 2023 report, and where appropriate, to offer sector competent advice on next steps that might be considered to ensure the Service can continue to move forward in a positive direction.

¹ [Independent Inspection of the Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service](#)

2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The picture back then: -

- 2.1 In 2022 when we began our initial inspection scoping exercise, we observed a Service that had experienced a degree of disruption. The global covid pandemic clearly added to this disruption and, of course, led to challenges across public and private sector organisations across the globe. Through necessity the Service had adopted a reductionist approach, with its key focus being to provide, maintain and deliver an effective emergency service.
- 2.2 In line with all public sector organisations, NIFRS had found itself operating within an extremely challenging fiscal environment and had experienced a real terms reduction of £14.5 million since 2011/12. The steps taken to ensure that ‘front-line services’ were protected, had resulted in reductions in support services, both in terms of personnel numbers and a lack of investment in enabling management information systems (MIS).
- 2.3 One of the biggest challenges observed, and one we considered may have been at the heart of a number of other issues, was the lack of stability of leadership at the Executive level and throughout the Service. Alarming, at the time of writing the report, 47 of the 94 flexi-duty officer roles were being occupied in a temporary capacity. There had also been instability at a political level, with the Northern Ireland Assembly for a number of years and as a result there had been limited Ministerial priority and direction setting for NIFRS. We observed and commented on the absence of a Framework Document which would normally be expected to set out Government priorities against which the Service would be expected to perform. The Board had also experienced instability, and was still in a state of change when we carried out our work. This instability had resulted in significant challenges in the building of key relationships between DoH, the Board, Executive Leadership Team (ELT) and across the Service.
- 2.4 We made reference to the lack of a clear methodology applied to the strategic direction of the Service. This included the absence of any robust analysis of risk and demand, a working Finance Strategy and a working People Strategy, all underpinned by a clear corporate risk appetite.
- 2.5 One of the most risk critical examples of this was the failure to prioritise the full alignment with National Operational Guidance (NOG), despite an Internal Audit Report identifying the risk and a recovery action plan being agreed. We considered this to be a significant risk to the organisation, and more importantly a risk to those engaged in emergency response.
- 2.6 We were delighted to observe and reflect that the vast majority of staff interviewed demonstrated a very strong association with the ‘brand’ and possessed a genuine pride in their respective and collective roles. The Inspection Team witnessed a clear desire, amongst all staff groups, to always do the right thing for the communities they serve and deliver positive outcomes. Individuals, and teams, would frequently go beyond what should reasonably be expected and plugged gaps in structures and modern practices by working long hours and displaying incredible levels of goodwill. In spite of this many staff expressed frustration at, what they perceived to be, a lack of leadership and poor communications.
- 2.7 From a front-line service delivery perspective, many personnel felt vulnerable. They were concerned at the reduced crewing levels and the quality of training available to

develop and maintain their competence. Others felt frustrated at reduced resources in Fleet, Information Technology (IT), Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and Operational Support. Again they expressed frustration at what they saw as a lack of leadership and a coherent direction of travel.

- 2.8 Toward the end of our inspection we were pleased to see some stability returning to the ELT with the majority of ELT members being appointed in a substantive capacity. We also reported that it was our belief that the ELT at that time had demonstrated without question that they had the skills and professionalism to lead the Service on this journey of change. We were also encouraged by the desire shown by all parties to work with the Inspection Team to identify opportunities for improvement.
- 2.9 We stated very clearly however that the level of improvement required would take time, financial investment and significant political support if the Service were to be successful in their endeavours.

The Picture Now:-

- 2.10 Whilst this review aims to consider progress against the eleven recommendations in the 2022 report, it would be wrong not to reflect on the very clear improvements that have been made since our last visit.
- 2.11 Perhaps the most obvious improvement, that was clearly evident during this inspection, was the improved stability within the Board, ELT and Sponsor Team. The stability provided by now substantive post holders across these groups, coupled with professional and collegiate relationships between various parties, has led to a vastly improved atmosphere and a working environment where all concerned are clear on their roles and responsibilities and are working together toward achieving improvement. The leadership styles displayed by the Chief Fire and Rescue Officer, The Chair of the Board, and the Head of the Sponsor Unit are complimentary, appropriate, and respectful. Whilst each has a role to play, each has an appreciation and respect for the other. This creates a much improved working environment and one that is worthy of praise.
- 2.12 This stability of leadership has also permeated throughout the various layers of the organisation. The number of staff occupying temporary positions has reduced significantly since our last visit and the decision to assign Station Managers to each of the fire stations across the country has been welcomed by all and has provided a clear focal point and a stability that was so clearly lacking.
- 2.13 The allocation of dedicated resources to teams involved in the alignment with NOG has led to significant steps being taken toward the achievement of this task. The risk based prioritisation of work is a very sensible approach and the enthusiasm and professionalism of those engaged in this work was encouraging and impressive.
- 2.14 Equally impressive was the progress made in the creation of a comprehensive and evidence based Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP). The publication of the CRMP is a significant milestone on the journey to ensuring NIFRS can align service delivery assets to known risks and in line with activity and demand data.
- 2.15 Investment in training is clear to see with the opening of the new learning development centre in Cookstown earlier this year. It would be difficult to see how anyone could fail to be impressed with this facility. Of course, building a training facility is only part of the journey of improvement. A comprehensive understanding of training need, coupled with a sophisticated programme of training courses and

development opportunities aligned to Service and individual needs, is necessary to ensure staff are equipped with the skills to carry out their roles and afforded the opportunity to maintain and enhance those skills at appropriate points in their careers. It is fair to say that whilst the Service are working towards this goal, they are not yet fully aware of how they will achieve this and ensure staff are provided access to this new facility.

- 2.16 There are a number of other areas of business where it is clear that NIFRS are sighted on what needs to be done, but has not yet made the progress we might have hoped to see. We fully accept that budget, resources, and competing priorities are factors in this. However, we would encourage the Service, and the DoH, to work in partnership and with focus in their efforts to action the remaining areas of work in relation to the recommendations of the 2023 report within a meaningful timeframe.

3 PROGRESS AGAINST RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 Recommendation 1

A dedicated resource should be tasked with the alignment of NIFRS policy and associated training to National Operational Guidance.

Our original inspection report noted:-

- *There are 21 areas of NOG, and NIFRS has added 4 additional areas that they have deemed equally relevant – BA, Initial Operational Response, Specialist Operational Response and Covid-19 Operational. This effectively means there are 25 areas of NOG which NIFRS should be aligned to. The limited assurance was provided on the basis that at that time only 3 pieces of NOG had been fully aligned by NIFRS. They also highlight that there is local guidance in place covering all 25 areas, however this has not been through the NIFRS alignment framework and it is not possible therefore to be assured that it does align with national best practice. This is a significant risk to NIFRS.*

On review of progress we are pleased to note that a dedicated resource has been allocated to this vitally important work. The Service has established a NOG alignment team with 1 x Station Commander and 6 x Watch Commander's aligned to this task. Whilst the team had vacancies within it at the time of this review, the Service were committed to filling these vacancies and had produced clear job descriptions and detailed role descriptions to assist in attracting new members to the team.

The approach adopted by the NOG alignment team is one based on risk, rather than numbers. Whilst the areas of published NOG in existence is an ever changing number. The team have resisted the temptation to focus on the easier wins, and instead have focussed on the areas that carry the greatest risk to firefighter and public safety.

By completing these risk critical conversions first they have reduced the corporate risk that may have been carried by the organisation significantly. At the time of this review the alignment team believed they were between 37 – 40% compliant with all existing NOG. Whilst this may at face value seem fairly low in percentage terms, the risk based approach adopted means that the alignment outstanding will relate to guidance that is deemed less critical in terms of risk to life, property, public and firefighter safety. We commend the team and the Service on the approach they have

taken and are encouraged to note the ambitious timeline and programme of work associated with achieving full compliance.

Creating policy is of course one element of fully integrating NOG. To be fully assured that this policy has led to improvement it must be communicated to all staff, aligned to relevant training programmes, aligned to the provision of any additional equipment required and monitored to ensure change has been effective. NIFRS is fully aware of the steps necessary to achieve this integrated approach and has adopted a cross departmental approach to this work that can be evidenced and measured.

Progress against the NOG alignment programme is monitored by an Ops Guidance and Assurance Delivery Board, chaired by the Deputy Chief Officer.

It was also pleasing to note that the NOG alignment team had factored in an ongoing process that would ensure that all relevant documents/practices would be reviewed on a 3 yearly basis. Any changes made to national guidance between review periods will be considered by the team. Where changes are considered to be significant, NIFRS policy will be updated and rolled out as soon as possible. Where changes are deemed to be minor, these will be captured and incorporated into updated policy at the time of 3 yearly review.

The process to ensure staff have adopted any new practices resulting from alignment to NOG is through active monitoring, in the training department, through online modules, or as part of the Ops Assurance process.

It must be acknowledged that NIFRS has made significant progress in regard to the alignment of policies and practices to NOG. The allocation of dedicated resources and the risk based approach to achieving alignment are worthy of praise. However, the Service must continue to focus on this area of work and should continue to resource this team, as well as ensuring that Subject Matter Experts are afforded sufficient time within their working day to support the work of the alignment team.

3.2 Recommendation 2

A Community Risk Management Plan should be developed that accurately reflects risk, activity and demand across areas and across times of day. An Emergency Response Model that is aligned, or at least based on, this CRMP should be developed.

Our original inspection report noted:-

- *NIFRS should identify the CRMP Project as a key strategic deliverable for developing the future vision and informing the strategic objectives and priorities of the organisation for the next 5 years and beyond.*
- *The CRMP should adopt a formal project management process and this key strategic project should be embedded within the organisation's overall Programme Management Office.*
- *External validation of the risk and demand methodologies adopted to support and inform the development of the next CRMP.*

- *The foundation of the CRMP is a robust analysis of the risk and demand, aligned to the risk appetite of the Service and key stakeholders alongside practical considerations such as available budget.*

On reviewing progress against this recommendation it is pleasing to note, following some solid work by a small dedicated team, that NIFRS has now published a comprehensive Community Risk Management Plan 2025 – 2030.²

Following a period of formal public consultation, the CRMP was published, and made available on the NIFRS website on 1 April 2025. The CRMP sets out the role of the Service, the governance structures in place, the disposition of assets and the process adopted in analysing risk.

Behind this front facing public document there has clearly been a significant amount of work done to understand risk and to build a model that draws on data from multiple sources to consider key risks today, as well as forecasting potential risks of the future. Data from the national Incident Recording System (IRS) presents a picture of activity and demand across the year. By considering this data across the past ten years a picture can be drawn to show geographical and seasonal areas of high and low demand, incident types attended, mobilising and attendance times, and changes in trends. In addition the Service has added census and deprivation data, data held by PSNI in regard to road traffic collisions, council planning data, and data from the National Risk Register to strengthen its understanding of risk to communities, at the present time, and into the future.

This work has been completed in line with National Fire Chief's Council (NFCC) Guidance and is to a very high standard. NIFRS has also worked hard to ensure that external validation (in respect to Road Traffic Collision (RTC) risk methodology), was provided by 'ORH', a well-respected company with a track record of supporting emergency services undertaking this type of analysis. This validation was provided through an NFCC funded programme.

The team responsible for this work is small in size. Whilst they have achieved a great deal, and the passion, knowledge, and lived experience of the team leader is to be applauded, I fear the Service risks having a single point of failure should this person choose for any reason to leave the organisation. I would suggest that this team needs to be further resourced to ensure business continuity, and to allow the Service to take the next steps on the CRMP journey.

Whilst the first steps on this journey have been taken, our 2023 report also noted:-

- *The outcome from the CRMP should be used to inform the overall organisational structure, including number, type and location of operational assets, number of operational personnel required to crew the assets, including duty system and the number of support and enabling staff required to maintain and support an effective operational capability.*

There has been little progress made in this regard to date. This is perhaps understandable as it is of course sensible to fully understand the risks and resources available before even contemplating any changes to frontline emergency response models. The CRMP was published less than six months ago and this will act as the evidence base on which any change to the disposition of emergency assets can be considered. It is incumbent on the Board and the ELT to ensure that the Service has

² [NIFRS Community Risk Management Plan](#)

the right assets, in the right places, to respond to the risks faced across the country. It is also their duty to ensure that public funds are used to best effect and any opportunity for efficiencies to be made are considered, and where appropriate implemented. This may of course lead to efficiencies, however will certainly provide the platform for redistribution of current resources to align with community risk. It may also mean that vital elements of the Service, that could currently be considered to be under resourced, are funded appropriately to ensure the smooth running of this vital emergency service.

3.3 **Recommendation 3**

Improvement to training systems and potential review of training structures should be introduced to ensure that staff are provided with risk critical training and development opportunities, aligned to a development pathway that resembles those in place across the UK.

Our original inspection report noted:-

- *The consistent theme highlighted, at all levels throughout the Service, was that despite there being examples of excellence, firefighters are not systematically receiving suitable and sufficient L&D. It would also be challenging for the Service to evidence the competence of its operational firefighters, officers and control staff, therefore, the Service is operating at considerable risk and could be challenged under the Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Order 1978.*
- *NIFRS does not have a robust training needs analysis (TNA) linked to a SWP which should be based on supporting the Service's strategic aims and objectives. As a result, it does not therefore understand the capability and capacity required to deliver L&D. Almost all those interviewed recognised that NIFRS is finding it a challenge to train and assess its workforce'.*
- *Insufficient numbers of instructors in LDC makes the delivery of training courses difficult, especially with the additional demand placed on instructor's time with the commencement of the almost 40 new trainees in October 2022 and with another course programmed for early 2023. Instructors feel under severe pressure to continue to deliver scheduled courses with not enough competent instructors to achieve this safely and in line with policies.*
- *NIFRS does not have a cohesive development pathway for any rank for wholetime, on-call or control staff. NIFRS adopted the principles of the Integrated Personal Development System (IPDS) in 2005; this was an NVQ 'evidence of competence' approach. However, the relevant standards were only developed for firefighters, Crew Commanders (CC) and Watch Commanders (WC). The NVQ program stopped around 2007/08. NIFRS only ever adopted the firefighter development program.*
- *NIFRS is aware of all the areas mentioned above. There are a number of internal and external reports that have highlighted the issues regarding training and workforce development. We accept there have been some significant challenges presented in recent years such as stability in leadership, budgetary pressure and the global pandemic. However, it is still fair to say that little progress has been made against many of these areas. This presents a significant risk to the organisation and would be difficult to defend in the event of the death or serious*

injury to a firefighter or member of the public. A report on training, produced by Internal Audit and issued on 3 February 2020 stated that the assurance for training was limited. The Inspection Team would, in 2022, agree with this statement and found little evidence of meaningful progress.

As stated in our 2023 report, Firefighters are required to work in inherently dangerous environments, where it is not always possible to put a 'safe system of work' (SSOW) in place. The Fire and Rescue Service across the UK has historically adopted a 'safe person' approach. An essential part of this is the requirement for firefighters, at all levels, to receive suitable and sufficient training and appropriate development opportunities.

The Service's commitment to training is evident with the launch of the new Learning and Development Centre in Cookstown earlier this year. However, constructing a state-of-the-art training venue is only the beginning of the journey toward continuous improvement.

It was pleasing to hear that NIFRS has made significant progress in regard to the creation of a development pathway, aligned to NFCC doctrine and values. In partnership with Skills for Justice, the Service is now accredited to deliver Incident Command Level 1 (ICL1) courses in-house. It is anticipated that ICL2 courses will be delivered by NIFRS staff in the very near future.

It was also pleasing to hear that a 'compliance dashboard' system has been developed, and is being rolled out, across the Service. This system will allow managers at various levels in the organisation to view, in real time, levels of compliance against training targets and milestones. The system demonstrated was impressive and is a step toward the Service having corporate oversight of workforce competence in centrally delivered risk critical training areas. The system is, by the admission of NIFRS managers, a work in progress, with some teething problems still to be ironed out. However, this is certainly a move in the right direction and the Service should continue to refine this system and ensure it is operating to best effect across the country.

It was also encouraging to hear that progress had been made toward fully understanding the training needs of the workforce and designing a syllabus of training courses required to address these needs. Again this appears to be a work in progress and it may well have been sensible to have begun this work at an earlier stage in the development of the new training facility. Despite this observation, it is encouraging to see that action is now being taken to support the development of a comprehensive suite of training courses that will ensure necessary skills can be attained, and maintained, using local, regional and national facilities. This work must continue at pace if the facilities now available are to be used to their maximum potential and the workforce given access to the training they require to ensure their own safety, and the safety of the public.

During discussion it became apparent that capacity within the training function, as noted in our earlier report, was still very much an issue. To deliver the training determined as necessary in the training needs analysis referred to above, will require a significant increase in the number of instructors assigned to the new training facility. The Service has of course carried out some work to quantify this increase. The numbers, and associated costs of providing additional instructors are not insignificant. However, the implications of not providing necessary training and development opportunities are considerably more worrying. The Service must

therefore continue to develop a training and development programme that is fit for purpose and is resourced appropriately.

In addition to the number of instructors, the skills and experience of those aligned to training roles was another area of concern expressed to our inspection team in 2023. Whilst we are in no way criticising the qualifications or skills of those currently engaged in training roles, the Service should take any and all steps necessary to ensure that training is seen as a high value role that people are keen to carry out, rather than a career destination that is deemed less attractive than other positions.

The difficulty of attracting staff into training roles highlighted in our earlier report has in some ways been exacerbated with the move to the new facility in Cookstown. The non-proximity of the training centre to Belfast City is seen as a negative and discouraging to potential applicants and this is an obstacle that the Service will need to work hard to overcome. In a number of other Fire and Rescue Services across the UK, those occupying training posts are provided with an additional 'instructors allowance' to incentivise their commitment to this role. NIFRS does not currently pay such an allowance, but this option is under active consideration.

Another topic of discussion was that of income generation through third party use of training facilities at Cookstown. The Service is actively considering options in this regard, and it would appear appropriate that any such opportunity is fully explored and progressed. However, the Service should progress this in a manner consistent with meeting the delivery of its own training needs and through a clear understanding of the College target operating model to consider operational, capabilities, leadership development and corporate mandatory training for NIFRS, with any remaining capacity supporting collaborative and third party use.

It was encouraging to see the progress that has been made in the area of training and we look forward to reviewing the final NIFRS Training Plan which we were advised would be completed by the end of the financial year.

3.4 **Recommendation 4**

A Strategic Workforce Plan (SWP) should be created that identifies and takes steps to fill vacancies across the organisation in a bid to provide stability (particularly across management cadre).

Within our original report we noted :-

- *A key challenge identified during the inspection was the lack of stability in leadership across the Service, which appeared to contribute to several other organisational issues. As an example, at the time of reporting, 47 of the 94 flexi-duty officer roles were filled on a temporary basis. Additionally, the Service had experienced an exceptionally high turnover of Chief Fire and Rescue Officers and Executive Leadership Team (ELT) members. Leadership vacancies were managed reactively rather than proactively, and succession planning processes were limited, resulting in ongoing uncertainty and operational risk.*

It was pleasing to hear that the Service has made significant inroads in regard to stability of leadership. The situation we encountered in 2022/23 has been improved significantly and the number of posts held on a temporary basis is now in a much better place and is predicted to improve even further in the short to medium term.

Stability of leadership breeds confidence and calmness across the organisation. The Chief Fire and Rescue Officer and every member of the ELT are now appointed in permanent positions and are likely to be in post for the foreseeable future.

The cyclical approach to recruitment and promotion provides a sensible approach to ensuring posts are filled in a programmed and timely manner, with vacancies at the upper levels being filled first and resulting vacancies addressed in a system that flows logically.

Whilst there will always be a need to fill some posts on a temporary basis, while awaiting selection processes to come around, the numbers in 'acting up' positions is now at a manageable level and staff appear to be appreciative of this improvement.

The Service are clearly determined to remain on top of this situation and this issue will be monitored at appropriate levels throughout the organisation both in an operational context and also through the People and Culture Committee of the Board.

Whilst the Strategic Workforce Plan called for in our recommendation has not yet been published, it is clear that a lot of thought has gone into the development of such a plan and I am assured this is very much a work in progress.

The managers I spoke to during this review were honest enough to admit that current systems, whilst being able to predict in some way where vacancies might occur in the future, lack the ability to provide a sophisticated prediction of 'skills attrition'. A very simplistic example might be, that whilst we know 'Firefighter A' is due to retire in January next year, and we can recruit to fill this post, we are not analysing the skills and attributes that 'Firefighter A' possesses, and ensuring that training is provided, courses accessed, qualifications attained by another person, in preparation for these skills exiting the organisation. A predictive system of this type relevant to both operational and leadership skillsets, would allow the organisation to tailor recruitment, development and advancement to match actual need.

A Strategic Workforce Plan that captures these points, and is aligned to a training and development strategy, and to resource budget planning would be a welcome addition to the NIFRS suite of corporate strategies.

3.5 Recommendation 5

Appropriate investment should be made in IT systems that will improve efficiency in relation to support staff functions.

Areas for consideration within our original report included :-

- *An IT Strategy is developed for NIFRS and approved through the formal organisational governance processes. It is important that the IT Strategy is seen as a key enabler for NIFRS and that it complements and supports the overarching organisational strategy with appropriate links to projects through the Programme Management Office. The Strategy should also take account of delivering compliance with the latest cyber security protocols and seek to deliver an integrated IT system and applications.*
- *The existing contract with the BSO for the provision of an IT capability should be reviewed to ensure that it remains fit for purpose and meeting the needs of NIFRS. The review of the contract should take cognisance of current live projects*

and their associated IT needs as well as any project likely to be commissioned soon, essentially futureproofing the contract for the remainder of its life.

- The Service should consider an evaluation of the recently commenced IT upgrades is commissioned to ensure that the changes will meet the organisational needs now and into the future. The review should be completed and outcomes known before fully committing to and implementing the proposed changes right across the organisation*

It is pleasing to see that NIFRS has published a Digital, Data and Technology Strategy (DDaT) for the period 2025-2030. The document presents an honest picture of the digital deficit and sets out clearly where the Service is now in regard to IT solutions. The DDaT strategy presents an ambitious programme of change as well as presenting some of the challenges currently faced.

This is an important step on the journey of improvement and those responsible for developing this Strategy should be congratulated. The objectives presented within the Strategy are appropriate and suitably ambitious, and the professional approach to the management of this programme of change is once again worthy of praise.

NIFRS continues to work in partnership with Business Services Organisation (BSO), an IT provider to the Health and Social Care sector. The relationship between BSO and NIFRS appears to be a healthy one and the support and professional competence of those aligned to this programme appears to be allowing the Service to move forward as planned.

Significant progress has been made toward securing new Payroll, Finance and Crewing and Payment System (CAPS) which will put the Service on a much more professional footing.

It is also pleasing to observe the governance arrangements, and systems in place to monitor progress, at various levels across the organisation.

Whilst the procurement of a new Command and Control Mobilising System (CCMS) was delayed due to unavoidable contract issues with the original supplier, the Service has moved quickly to resolve this situation and is working toward the introduction of a modern and resilient system.

Whilst NIFRS has not yet fully resolved the issues highlighted in our original report, it was clear to see that the Service has identified and prioritised the areas that need to be addressed, and has taken significant steps toward improvement.

As stated during our 2022/23 inspection, digital transformation is essential, upgrading and modernising existing systems and practices is not optional, it is vital. NIFRS has a clear grasp of this and it is encouraging to see this work progressing, however there is a need for support to address the deficit in resource and skill-set that the organisation has identified, if it is to be best placed for success.

3.6 Recommendation 6

A clear set of priorities should be issued by Government in the form of a Fire Framework that sets expectations and priorities for the coming years.

It was noted in our original report that:-

- *The absence of a clear strategic ask, priorities and objectives coming from government leaves the NIFRS Board and ELT with a lack of clarity over how government sees the Service contributing to key national outcomes and with little sense of a shared vision of this contribution. This disempowers the Board in discussions with the DoH over resources necessary to maintain the critical aspects of operations and necessary development.*
- *A Fire Framework for Northern Ireland would provide a closer link for NIFRS to the 'Programme for Government' outcomes, set a clear framework to develop measurable targets for NIFRS and would enable a clear Ministerial statement of strategic direction and priorities which can and should be reviewed periodically.*

The Fire and Rescue Service in Northern Ireland forms part of the Department of Health (DoH). The statutory framework for fire and rescue services in Northern Ireland is titled 'The Fire and Rescue Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. Section 53 of this Order, titled Framework Document, places the following duty of the Department:-

53. (1) The Department shall prepare a document—

(a) setting out priorities and objectives for the Board in connection with the carrying out of its functions; and

(b) containing—

(i) such guidance in connection with the carrying out of any of those functions; and

(ii) such other matters relating to the Board or those functions, as the Department considers appropriate.

Despite this, in our 2022/23 inspection we were unable to identify such a document.

Since our initial inspection there has been significant change within the DoH Sponsor Body with key individuals moving on, and new members of staff being brought in. This type of change can lead to loss of corporate knowledge and a period of adjustment leading to delay in progressing departmental objectives.

Whilst I fully accept the challenges presented it is important to stress that this recommendation is a key enabler to ensuring that the NIFRS is able to move forward and able to act as an Arm's Length Body (ALB), with a clear set of objectives aligned to the Programme of Government.

It was therefore pleasing to hear during this inspection that the Sponsor Team at DoH had now been resourced appropriately and was being led by a person who displayed a keen desire to work with NIFRS and to deliver against key objectives. Several months before this inspection I had been approached by this team and had reviewed an early draft of a Framework document that would attempt to resolve this gap.

I was pleased to note that this draft was under active review and that the Executive Leadership Team had been approached to offer comment and to assist in the development of the final document.

Whilst this recommendation has not yet been fully actioned, I remain optimistic that a formal Fire and Rescue Framework will be published in the near future and I look forward to considering future drafts enroute to this publication.

3.7 **Recommendation 7**

A revised formal corporate planning process should be developed that includes a Strategic Plan (influenced by the CRMP, and aligned to the Fire Framework), Annual Operating Plans, Local Plans, Station Plans etc and an associated Performance Management Framework to measure progress against these plans.

There is clear evidence that work is progressing in regard to the documents referred to above. The CRMP is a key publication and goes beyond the expectations of the Inspectorate team. Many other key documents are under development, with some being dependent of the publication of the Government's Fire Framework.

Progress against this work is being monitored at various levels throughout the organisation, up to and including the Board and relevant Committees.

Recent alterations to management structures, aligning command areas to create a model coterminous with councils and other partners, will no doubt assist in the publication and usefulness of local plans, and station plans.

Progress against this action should be monitored and associated timescales adhered to. Where necessary, slippage should be challenged. Whilst I acknowledge the implementation of a 'real time' organisational performance system may be subject to the prioritisation in the DDaT strategy, I am assured that much of this work is scheduled for completion by April 2026 and it would be interesting to review progress at an appropriate point in the future.

I would encourage the Service not only to consider performance against tangible inputs and outputs. Instead every effort should be made to create a suite of performance indicators (SPI, KPI, LPI's) that consider outcomes and improvements. This approach will help NIFRS direct resources where they have the most impact, rather than aiming to meet targets that are easy to measure but offer less return on investment. It was encouraging to hear those I met on this review using terms like 'outcomes based accountability' it will be even more encouraging to see these terms embedded in working practices and the Service's approach to the measurement of performance.

3.8 **Recommendation 8**

Projects should be delivered through, or in association with, a programme office and appropriate programme management disciplines applied.

In our 2022/23 Inspection report we noted:-

- *When delivering any significant change programme with many separate projects there is a need for this to be co-ordinated via a 'programme office' approach. This helps to ensure that interdependencies are identified, scarce resources are allocated appropriately and in a timely fashion. Most importantly progress is tracked and any challenges are identified and can be supportively addressed. This approach should apply across the whole organisation. It should sit alongside a robust Performance Management Framework and within the business planning cycle if it is to be effective.*

It is fair to say that the findings contained within our initial inspection report were in no way a surprise to the NIFRS ELT or the Board. In fact, following a 'priority 1' recommendation by their own Internal Auditors, the Service had commissioned 'the Strategic Investment Board (SIB)' to carry out a review of existing project management arrangements. The SIB report being published in July 2023 and offered five recommendations that supported the observations made in our report published later that year.

It was clear from both reports that the Service would benefit greatly from establishing, and resourcing a professional programme office, to oversee and coordinate significant projects. Failure to do so would most likely lead to duplications of effort, overlap in strategic objectives and confusion in regard to the management of progress and performance.

In short, NIFRS would be unable to deliver a comprehensive programme of change, and subsequent Service improvement, without first establishing an improved system of programme/project management.

NIFRS has taken significant steps toward achieving this improvement since our last inspection. The Service has adopted the Prince 2 Agile approach to managing projects and has currently trained in the region of 60 members of staff in this methodology. It is a requirement for anyone involved in delivering a project of any significance to either have this qualification, or to commit to attending a course at their earliest convenience.

Whilst steps have been taken to establish the programme management of large projects through external support arrangements, the proposed team have not yet been appointed and funding is proving to be a challenge. At present the key focus, for understandable reasons, is on overseeing the DDaT programme, described above.

The benefits of taking a professional approach to the delivery of this programme must surely speak to the importance of developing a system that provides oversight of all ongoing projects and delivers a dashboard of work ongoing, progress made and steps remaining.

Investment in such a system may seem challenging within existing budgets, however, such an investment is likely to lead to a more efficient and timely delivery of objectives with improved service delivery and being the ultimate goal.

3.9 Recommendation 9

The definition of roles and responsibilities should be revised and clarified. Relevant training should be provided to ensure management and Board members act within the parameters of their respective roles.

During our last inspection we noted:-

- *Some non-executives think that the ELT do not understand well enough what the role of the Board is and, to a lesser extent, executives think the Board do not understand their role.*
- *There clearly needs to be work done on exploring and agreeing with each other where the respective roles lie, what assurance can be asked for and can be*

given, what is and what is not appropriate within each role – and where they might come up against boundaries.

Since publishing our last report there have been a number of significant developments that have impacted on the observations made above.

The appointment of a permanent Chief Fire and Rescue officer and the filling of key roles within the ELT has without doubt improved the feeling of stability. The leadership style of those appointed and their desire to work in partnership with the Board and engage positively with the DoH Sponsor Team has also led to improved confidence in the Service and a clearer appreciation of each other's roles, challenges and priorities.

Changes within the Board have also helped to settle this relationship with the new Chair building on the work of his predecessor but very much bringing his own experience and style to the role.

Stability and dedicated resource within the Sponsor Team, albeit at an early stage of maturity, is also encouraging to observe.

The publication of a formal 'Partnership Agreement'³ between the DoH and NIFRS is another welcomed step. The document, published in January 2024, clearly defines the roles and responsibilities of key individuals, groups, committees and departments. It clearly articulates the authority delegated to the Service and the accountability arrangements in place. I firmly believe this is a visible commitment that demonstrates a confidence and a desire to work closely, whilst showing trust in leadership and a willingness to devolve, and subsequently accept, responsibility. The changes in working relationships and levels of engagement demonstrate that this is more than a paper exercise.

3.10 Recommendation 10

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) must be a priority for all public services. NIFRS should take steps to review organisational culture to ensure that staff behaviours reflect the corporate values described in its strategic documents.

During our 2022/23 inspection we visited every fire station and workplace in NIFRS. Whilst we observed, and commented on, the dedication, enthusiasm and desire to improve, shown by many members of the workforce. We also commented on some less positive comments and behaviours, as well as some concerns raised by individual staff members, that led us to conclude that the organisation should reflect on its corporate values and take steps to review organisational culture.

Given this follow up review was carried out over a 3 day period, it was impossible to revisit the same number of workplaces, or engage with anywhere near the number of staff members met on our initial inspection. It is therefore difficult to gauge if any tangible improvement has been achieved regarding the areas raised in the first report.

It was pleasing to hear that corporate values are woven into many aspects of the Service's business. From recruitment, advancement, appraisal and discipline, to

³ [Partnership-Agreement-between-the-Department-of-Health-and-the-Northern-Ireland-Fire-and-Rescue-Service.pdf](#)

partnership working and community engagement the Values play a prominent role. It was equally pleasing to hear that the new People Strategy, having now been published, includes clear statements in relation to acceptable behaviours.

It was however disappointing to note that there has been limited delivery around the organisation challenging terminology and isolated comments with regards to women. There is, however, investment underway to review cultural issues such as the development of a NIFRS Values & Behaviour Framework, rolling out a Performance Management System and significant investment in supervisory leadership development to skill first line managers in tackling such behaviours. This is coupled with a new on-line induction process and EDI training to all new recruits

3.11 Recommendation 11

The DoH should establish arrangements for the ongoing scrutiny and inspection of the NIFRS by an appropriate, fully independent and operationally competent body.

As stated in our initial inspection report:-

- We firmly believe that there is value in formal and routine inspection of large organisations by an independent and sector competent body. We would urge the DoH to explore options available to ensure appropriate independent scrutiny continues beyond this inspection process*

As HM Chief Inspector of the Scottish fire and Rescue Service I have a statutory duty, defined in the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005, to carry out proportionate inspection of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to ensure it is performing in an efficient and effective manner, and in line with the principles of Best Value.

My ability, and the ability of my team at HMFSI, to apply independent and sector competent scrutiny of the Service is of great value and assists in the journey of continuous improvement.

In the absence of a similar body in Northern Ireland, HMFSI has provided support to the DoH for a number of years. The Chief Inspector supports the technical role of fire advisor to the Department. However, the informality of this arrangements leaves the Department vulnerable and dependent of goodwill and capacity within the Inspectorate in Scotland.

It is pleasing to note that an options appraisal exercise has been carried out and that steps are being taken to consider how best to achieve a more formal arrangement that guarantees access to advice, and proportionate scrutiny from an independent and competent source.

I look forward to following progress against this recommendation and remain ready to assist in any way deemed appropriate until such an arrangement is in place.

SUMMARY

In concluding this report, I would like to thank the Department of Health Sponsor Team for inviting me to return to NIFRS to review progress against the recommendations we made in September 2023.

It is encouraging to see the work that has been done since our initial inspection, and even more encouraging to observe the passion and drive displayed by all those tasked with providing this vital emergency service.

The stability in leadership, the desire to provide the best service possible, and the willingness to embrace change and move forward are a credit to all those tasked with protecting the citizens of Northern Ireland.

Whilst the pace of change, often based on the prioritisation of resources, may at times feel frustrating, I am in no doubt that this is a Service with a clear vision and the skills and ambition to achieve great things.

As always, this will only be achievable with continued political and financial support.

Glossary

ALB	-	Arm's Length Body
AC	-	Area Commander
BA	-	Breathing Apparatus
BSO	-	Business Services Organisation
CAPS	-	Crewing and Payment System
CCMS	-	Command and Control Mobilising System
CFRO	-	Chief Fire and Rescue Officer
CC	-	Crew Commander
CRMP	-	Community Risk Management Plan
DCFRO	-	Deputy Chief Fire and Rescue Officer
DDaT	-	Digital, Data and Technology Strategy
DoH	-	Department of Health
EDI	-	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
ELT	-	Executive Leadership Team
ERS	-	Emergency Response Standard
FFC	-	Firefighter Control
GC	-	Group Commander
HMFSI	-	His Majesty's Fire Service Inspectorate
HQ	-	Headquarters
HR	-	Human Resources
ICL	-	Incident Command level
IPDS	-	Integrated Personal Development System
IRMP	-	Integrated Risk Management Plan
IT	-	Information Technology
KPI	-	Key Performance Indicator
L&D	-	Learning and Development
LDC	-	Learning and Development Centre

LPI	-	Local Performance Indicator
MIS	-	Management Information System
MSFM	-	Management Statement and Financial Memorandum
NDPB	-	Non-Departmental Public Body
NFCC	-	National Fire Chiefs Council
NIFRS	-	Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service
NJC	-	National Joint Council for Local Authority Fire and Rescue Services
NOG	-	National Operational Guidance
NOL	-	National Operational Learning
NVQ	-	National Vocational Qualifications
OD	-	Organisational Development
P&P	-	Prevention and Protection
PDR	-	Personal Development Review
PPE	-	Personal Protective Equipment
QFSM	-	Queen's Fire Service Medal
RAG	-	Red – Amber – Green
RTC	-	Road Traffic Collision
SFRS	-	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
SIB	-	Strategic Investment Board
SPI	-	Strategic Performance Indicator
SSOW	-	Safe system of work
SWP	-	Strategic Workforce Plan
TNA	-	Training Needs Analysis
TOR	-	Terms of Reference
WC	-	Watch Commander

Appendix A

How this inspection was carried out

The purpose of this inspection was to review progress against recommendations contained within the HMFSI report titled “Independent Inspection of the Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service”, published September 2023.

His Majesty’s Fire Service Inspectorate in Scotland (HMFSI) is a statutory body that operates within, but entirely independent of, the Scottish Government. The Inspectorate exists to provide independent, risk based, and proportionate professional inspection of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS). It performs an important role in the overall governance of the SFRS providing assurance to the people of Scotland and Scottish Ministers that the SFRS is working in an efficient and effective manner, meeting its statutory responsibilities and delivering Best Value.

Northern Ireland does not have its own Fire Service Inspectorate, and whilst HMFSI has no statutory standing or powers in Northern Ireland, there is a long-established professional relationship between HMFSI and the Department of Health (DoH) in Northern Ireland, with HM Chief Inspector of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (The Chief Inspector) having been asked to provide advice to DoH on a number of occasions since this relationship was first established.

This review of progress was carried out on the request of the Department of Health and supported by the Board and Executive Leadership Team of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service.

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

Robert Scott QFSM, Chief Inspector

Graeme Fraser, Assistant Inspector

We are grateful to Dan Stephens QFSM, Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser and Inspector for Wales who provided peer review of this report.

Methodology

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

- desk top review of documents and data supplied by NIFRS.
- face-to-face engagement with the Chief Fire and Rescue Officer and all members of the Executive Leadership Team.
- face-to-face and virtual interviews with the Chair of the NIFRS Board and Chairs of various Board committees.
- interviews with key members of the DoH Sponsor Team.
- face-to-face and virtual interviews with NIFRS staff leading on key areas of business.
- face-to-face discussion with wholetime and on-call fire crews.



— **Integrity, Objectivity, and Fairness.**