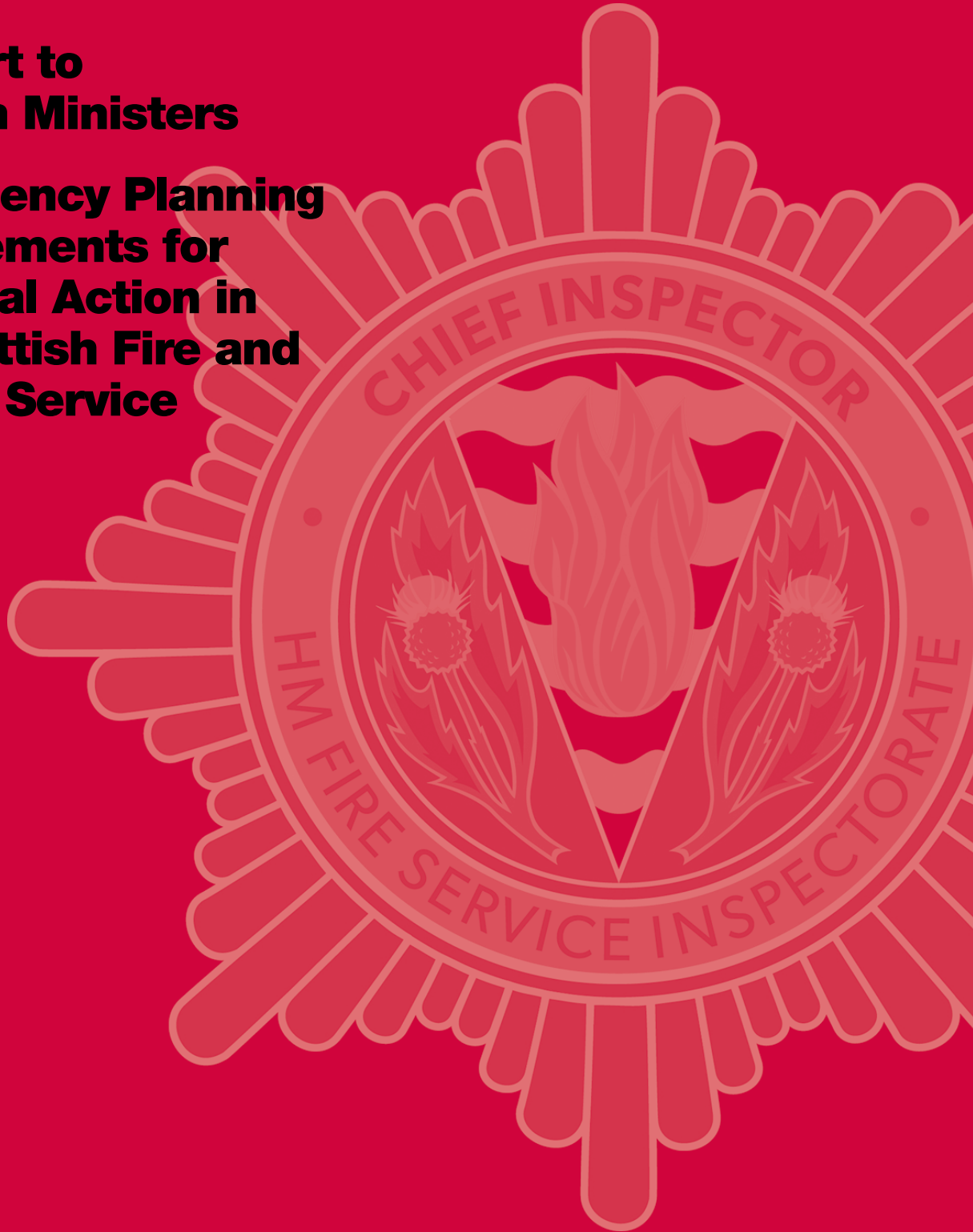




HM Fire Service Inspectorate

A Report to Scottish Ministers

Contingency Planning Arrangements for Industrial Action in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

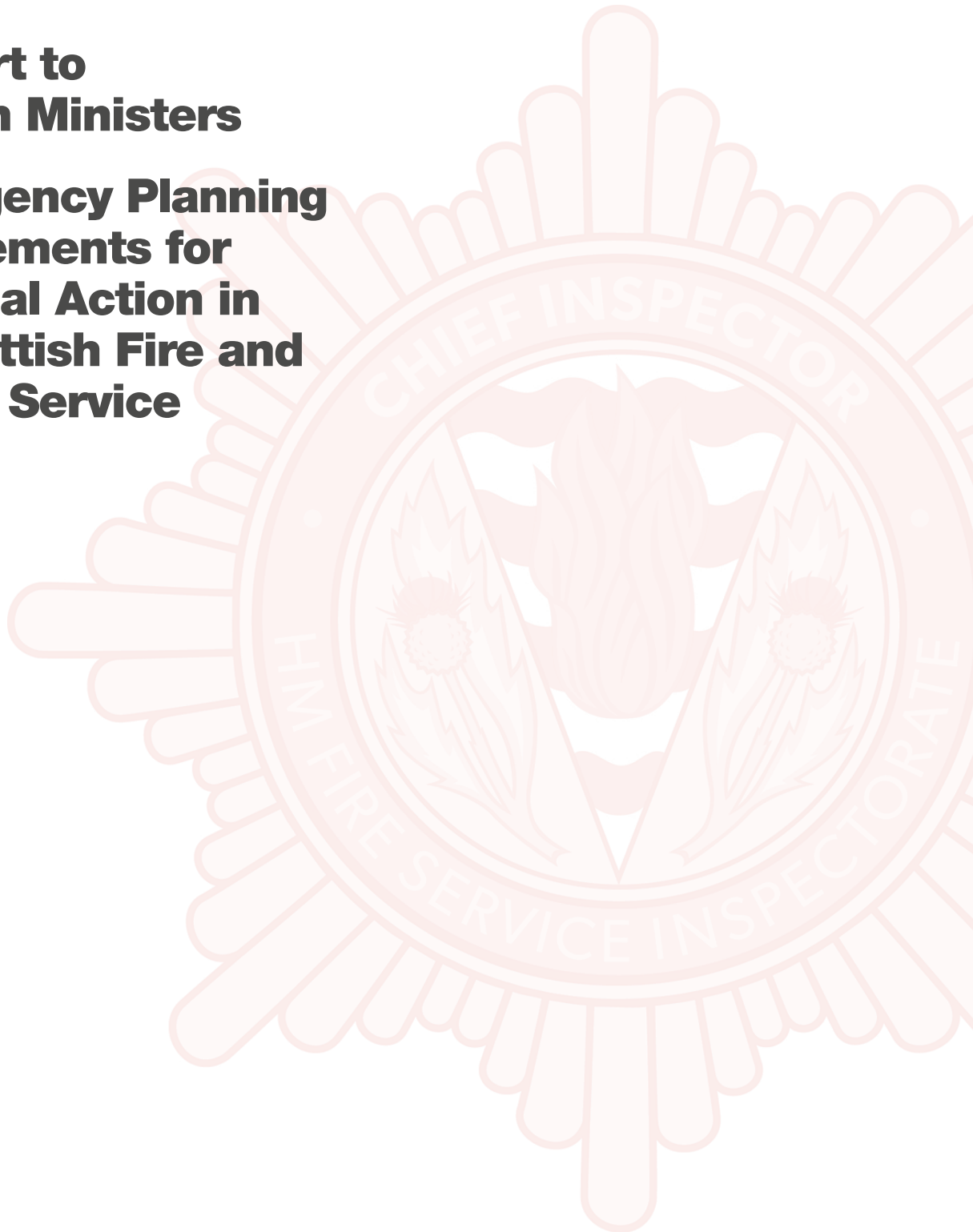


Integrity, Objectivity, and Fairness.

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Introduction

About HM Fire Service Inspectorate

His Majesty's Fire Service Inspectorate in Scotland (HMFSI) is a body that operates within, but independently of, the Scottish Government. Inspectors have the scrutiny powers specified in section 43B of the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005. These include inquiring into the state and efficiency of the SFRS, its compliance with Best Value, and the way it is carrying out its functions.

HMFSI Inspectors may, in conducting 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 investigate 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.

How this Inspection was Conducted

An inquiry by HM Inspectorate can be self-directed or can be subject to direction by Scottish Ministers. This inquiry was directed by the Minister for Community Safety, Elena Whitham.

The Inspection team members were:

- Robert Scott QFSM, Chief Inspector
- John Joyce QFSM, Assistant Inspector
- Gillian Buchanan, Inspection Officer (Seconded from SFRS)

A quality assurance process assisted us by challenging a draft of this report. Quality assurance was carried out by Brian McKenzie, HMFSI Assistant Inspector. The SFRS was offered and accepted the opportunity to comment on the content of this Inspection report.

All the members of the inspection team contributed to the development of this report and the quality assurance provided a professional challenge to the contents, assumptions and conclusions made.

Our report reflects the circumstance at the time of our visits and interviews which were undertaken between December 2022 and February 2023.

This inspection was not a comprehensive in-depth audit, albeit it is sufficiently detailed for the Chief Inspector to give a professional judgement on the activity and suitability of the SFRS Industrial Action contingency planning arrangements within an operational context.

Methodology

A draft outline which defined the scope of the inspection was prepared by HMFSI and shared with the SFRS for comment.

The Inspection team conducted a desk top analysis of key SFRS documents that related to their planning arrangements for IA. In person or Teams Interviews were conducted with SFRS personnel and subject matter experts. Inspection team members attended SFRS tabletop and live scenario testing sessions for the IA planning arrangements.

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Background

1. Pay and Conditions of Services in the Fire and Rescue Service in the UK are negotiated through a long-standing system of collective bargaining. The National Joint Council for Local Authority Fire and Rescue Services (NJC) is the body that sets the pay and the conditions of service of Grey Book (Uniformed) employees (other than those in Brigade Management roles) of fire and rescue services established under the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 (for England and Wales), the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005 (the Act) and the Fire and Rescue Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. The principal purpose of the NJC is to reach agreement on a national framework of pay and conditions for local application throughout the Fire and Rescue Service in the UK.
2. The parties to the negotiation are categorised as the Employers' Side and the Employees' Side. The Employers' Side comprises representatives of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) and all other Fire and Rescue Service' in the UK. The Employees' Side includes representatives of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), which represents the majority of firefighters in the UK. All prospective pay awards are put forward by the Employers' Side and are considered by the FBU.
3. In November 2022, the NJC Employers' Side revised their initial pay offer of 2% and proposed a new offer of 5% backdated to July 2022. As part of ongoing national pay negotiations, members of the FBU rejected the pay offer via a consultative members ballot. As a result of this decision the FBU raised a formal 'Registration of Trades Dispute' with a notice of ballot for strike action across the UK. The ballot for strike action opened on 5 December 2022 and closed on 30 January 2023. The strike ballot returned a mandate for strike action; 83% voted Yes with a turnout of 73% of FBU members.
4. Subsequently, following joint discussions at an NJC meeting convened on 8 February 2023, the national employers put forward a revised pay offer to the FBU of 7% backdated to July 2022 and a further 5% payable from July 2023. The Executive Council of the FBU unanimously recommended that its members accept this revised pay offer, and to that end a consultative ballot commenced on 20 February 2023. The consultative ballot results confirming acceptance of the offer were published on 6 March 2023.
5. The fieldwork for this inspection was undertaken between 1 December 2022 and 9 February 2023; at a time when Industrial Action (IA) by SFRS firefighters was a possibility. At that time, the February 2023 pay offer from the NJC remained under consideration and was the subject of an FBU ballot. Whilst we accept that the situation has changed and welcome the fact that IA has been avoided, we believe there is still value in considering those IA arrangements that were in place and those that remained under development. As such, we have taken the decision to publish this report and associated recommendations in a bid to learn valuable lessons for the future.

Inspection Process

6. On 1 December 2022, in line with Section 43B of the Act, the Minister for Community Safety directed HM Chief Inspector of the SFRS to conduct an inspection into the suitability of contingency planning arrangements in the event of IA in the SFRS. The role of HMFSI is set out in Appendix 1.
7. The SFRS has a duty under section 9(2a) of the Act, to “*secure the provision of the personnel, services and equipment necessary to meet efficiently all normal requirements.*” The Service also has a duty under section 2 of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 to “*plan for emergencies, and to maintain plans for the purpose of ensuring, as far as is reasonably practicable, that if an emergency occurs, it is still able to continue to perform its functions*”.
8. The Inspection focused on business resilience and maintenance of service during periods of potential IA by operational firefighters and/or Operations Control firefighters. We considered a range of IA options open to FBU members, including withdrawal of labour for portions of the working day or for more prolonged periods.
9. During the Inspection, and taking account of our stated purpose, we focused on the following areas:
 - Arrangements being considered for the maintenance of an effective operational response to emergencies across Scotland in the event of IA.
 - Arrangements being considered for the ongoing receipt and processing of emergency calls to the SFRS Operations Control Centres.
 - The development of safety advice for the public in the event of IA.
 - The development of safety advice for business premises in the event of IA.
 - Key SFRS business services and activities that must be maintained and arrangements in place to do so.
 - Identification of significant risks that could result from interruption or reduction to SFRS services and arrangements in place to mitigate such risks.
10. We are committed to using the outcomes of our inspection to report assurance levels in Business Continuity Planning arrangements for IA and to highlight where these are considered appropriate or otherwise.
11. The SFRS provides a range of critical services across communities. These services include responding to fires, and to non-fire emergencies, such as road traffic collisions, rescue from water, incidents involving hazardous or toxic chemicals etc. Operational services provided by the SFRS during IA would be on a reduced emergency basis and not to the levels that the communities of Scotland would normally expect.
12. To ensure that service can continue to be provided in the event of IA, the SFRS has developed a range of Business Continuity Planning (BCP) arrangements. In light of the heightened potential for IA, the SFRS reviewed these arrangements to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, the safety of the communities it serves. At the same time, an Industrial Action Tactical Action Group (IATAG), chaired by the SFRS Deputy




Chief Officer, was established. The group's aim was to list, track and quantify the risks posed by potential IA and to mitigate the effects of these risks while maintaining services where possible. The IATAG maintained a strategic control of SFRS work to prepare the organisation for potential IA. It put in place a wide range of plans and arrangements, aligned to its IA BCP, and ensured that these were tested and where appropriated, exercised. It should be noted that while the Service allocated significant resources, personnel and capacity to the planning phase for IA via the IATAG, it also maintained service delivery during this period.

13. While we acknowledge the work carried out in preparation for potential IA, we also note that exercising and testing was still ongoing in mid-January 2023. 'Business Rules' that SFRS officers would base appliance mobilisations and command and control decisions on, were still being developed and refined when this report was being drafted. We consider the publication and the testing of these business rules in an exercise environment to be extremely important. Given that the potential for IA is a reasonably foreseeable risk, we would encourage more active monitoring for future Service challenges and the regular updating of BCPs and their supporting processes upon which response plans will be based.
14. **Recommendation 1 – The SFRS should ensure that BCP's are routinely updated and refreshed to ensure that it can respond to foreseeable risks. Regular training and exercising in relation to potential service interruption should be programmed into annual training programmes.**

Key Findings

15. The SFRS has shown high levels of resilience in recent years evidenced through its involvement in the COP26 events and the challenges presented by the COVID Pandemic. The Service positively demonstrated flexibility to maintain reduced but appropriate levels of emergency response services in demanding circumstances. These events have been analysed and are documented in previous HMFSI Inspection reports.
16. The SFRS seeks to maintain high levels of emergency fire appliance availability across Scotland on a twenty-four-hour basis. The percentage of wholetime fire appliance availability across the SFRS at any point in time is termed as 'the confidence level'. The long-held confidence level for SFRS has been 96%, however with high personnel turnover levels associated with a recent change to firefighter pension arrangements¹ and the impact of COVID, this has been difficult to achieve and could now be considered by management as aspirational. During the Covid Pandemic confidence levels of 80% were not unheard of within the SFRS, during which times a full capability response, that adhered to the Incident Command System continued to be achieved. That is to say, the SFRS could mobilise to several concurrent large incidents and bring them to successful conclusions with an appropriate number of fire appliances and specialist capabilities such as water rescue, line rescue, hazardous materials incident response etc. Handling of these incidents is achieved by the deployment of appropriate numbers of trained and competent firefighters, supported by trained senior officers who fulfil a range of command and control duties as well as specialist functional roles. These senior officers are termed as Flexi Duty Officers (FDO). A fully crewed Operations Control (OC) function maintains critical command, control and communications functions in support of mobilised FDOs and firefighters during all operational incidents.
17. The SFRS has a total of 357 fire stations that are available for emergency response resource deployments across Scotland twenty-four hours per day, 365 days of the year. Seventy-four of these stations are crewed by wholetime firefighters who work within and are available to respond from these locations on a twenty-four-hour basis. Firefighters from these wholetime stations make up much of the initial emergency operational responses across the higher density urban areas of Scotland. The other 283 stations are crewed by On-Call firefighters. On-Call firefighter is a term that encompasses those conditioned to the Retained Duty System (RDS) and those operating as Volunteers. On-Call firefighters will normally respond from stations in more rural areas of Scotland. They generally live and work within their communities and commit to responding to emergency incidents when required.
18. At the time in which this inspection was being carried out, the SFRS was planning for IA by its operational and OC firefighters. Having considered available intelligence from a number of sources, the Service was able to develop an understanding of likely station availability during IA. Based on this evidence the Service held an expectation that a fairly high percentage of On-Call stations would remain available.

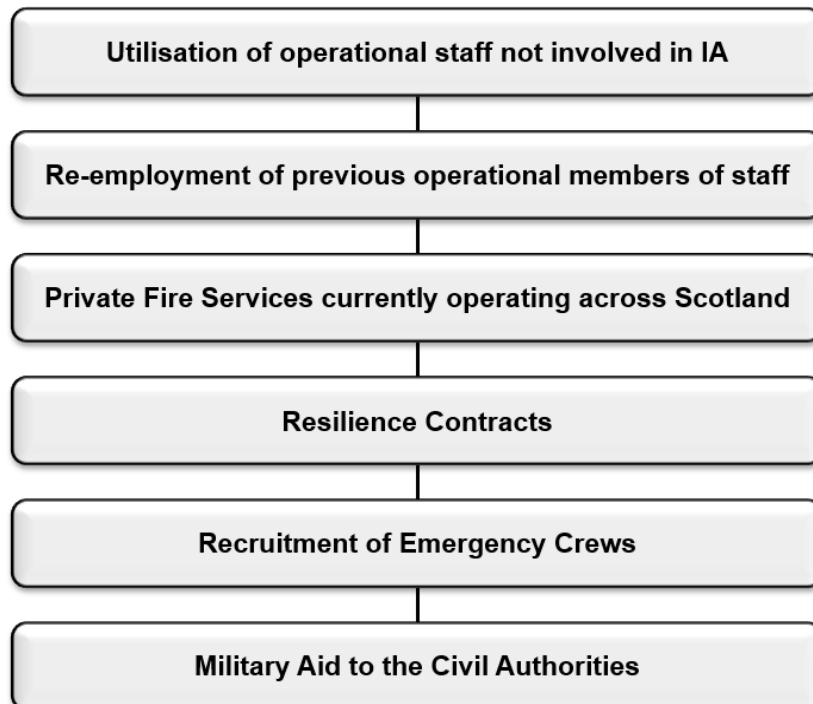
¹ [2022-03 - Firefighter Circular - 2015 Remedy Prospective Changes 0.pdf \(pensions.gov.scot\)](#)

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19. Despite this, the level of response capability to emergency situations across Scotland during IA would still have been significantly reduced from what is normally available. This reduced operational response capability is despite the SFRS working to put in place contingency arrangements for the periods of IA. In essence, the Service was preparing to use the available resources as well as could be expected in the circumstances.
20. A reduced operational response across Scotland during IA clearly represents a risk to communities that cannot be fully mitigated with the resources likely to be at the disposal of the SFRS. When the SFRS does respond to emergency calls during periods of IA, response times will be longer, and the weight of response is likely to be less than that achieved during Business as Usual (BAU) periods. Response times will also be extended due to the reduced level of resources available and increased travel time for appliances.
21. While the Inspection focused on overarching, but specific areas as set out above, it was clear that there were key issues that would require to be considered by the SFRS to allow for the maintenance of operational services at a reduced level of emergency cover during any period of IA. These were:
- Ensuring an adequate number of trained personnel were available to respond to emergency calls.
 - Providing suitably equipped Fire Service emergency appliances and necessary logistical support for their ongoing deployment during IA from geographically suitable locations across Scotland.
 - Providing appropriate infrastructure, personnel, and processes to manage the receipt of emergency calls and the mobilisation of appliances.

Arrangements Considered for the Maintenance of Effective Operational Response in the Event of Industrial Action

- 22. SFRS planning for the impacts of IA began in Summer 2022 and was co-ordinated by an Industrial Action Tactical Action Group (IATAG). This group was chaired by the Deputy Chief Officer and all decisions were noted within a central ‘decision log’. Actions from this group were distributed to a range of functional groups who reported outcomes back to the IATAG. The group met on a weekly basis and the weekly IATAG decision logs and supporting papers were considered by HMFSI during this inspection. The SFRS Strategic Leadership Team met on a weekly basis to support the IATAG. This ensured that appropriate decision making and governance in support of the IATAG was robust. The Chief Officer or Deputy Chief Officer attended weekly National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) meetings, this ensured that the SFRS could align itself when considered appropriate with UK thinking regarding planning for IA. This approach was used to inform SFRS IATAG planning.
- 23. The SFRS considered a range of resourcing options (figure 1) to allow the maintenance of service delivery during IA; these were set out in the paper ‘Operational Resilience in the Event of Industrial Action’ and presented to the IATAG on 28 October 2022.

Figure 1.



- 24. The six resourcing options, on being presented to the IATAG, were each made the subject of a feasibility study that considered their merits. These six options are considered below:

Utilisation of Operational Staff not Involved in IA

25. The SFRS engaged in a wide-ranging communications exercise with its workforce to determine who may have been willing to assist with the provision of emergency response cover during IA. Confirmed numbers of responses to this communications exercise were shared with HMFSI. The Service accepted that there remained a level of uncertainty as to the numbers of personnel who would elect to work during IA and what terms they may work under e.g. work locations, roles willing to be fulfilled, working only in current roles etc.
26. The SFRS planning assumed that a number of On-Call firefighters would maintain their operational availability within their home station areas during periods of IA and be available for protracted or escalating emergency incidents across Scotland. There were a range of communication mechanisms through which the SFRS offered personnel the opportunity to declare their intentions to work, or not, during IA. The Service used this information to develop, as far as possible, an understanding of personnel and appliance availability for potential periods of IA. However, despite best efforts, it was difficult for the SFRS to fully ascertain the numbers and locations of On-Call firefighters willing to work during IA. This is not a reflection of the Service's work to ascertain as far as possible personnel availability, but rather of staff not being willing to state their intentions one way or another. FBU membership of On-Call staff, which has been historically low, has increased in recent years and this could impact the SFRS planning assumptions. The availability of On-Call appliances is also routinely impacted by insufficient crewing across any given twenty-four-hour period, and this should be factored into planning considerations by the SFRS. Notwithstanding geographical nuances across Scotland, many On-Call stations were expected, from a SFRS planning assumption perspective, to function during any IA periods. We believe this is a reasonable assumption on the part of the SFRS.

Re-employment of Previous Operational Members of Staff

27. The SFRS wrote to all recently retired staff in a bid to understand if suitably qualified and reasonably current people would be willing to play a role in providing operational cover during IA. The number of positive responses was extremely low, as such this was not considered as an effective option.

Private Fire Services Currently Operating Across Scotland

28. Wide ranging consultation with private companies who provide emergency response fire cover was undertaken by the SFRS. From this consultation exercise, one private company who declared that they could provide crewed emergency appliances during periods of IA, was considered a potentially viable option and was taken to the IATAG for discussion and decision. This private company offers a limited range of services and capabilities which could include a limited number of fully crewed fire appliances, one high reach appliance, a water rescue unit and road traffic collision rescue capability.

29. The SFRS would have significantly reduced capabilities to bring to bear in an operational context during periods of IA, this reduction is foreseeable. There may be a willingness for operational firefighters to work during any IA, and potentially make up sufficient crews to begin to close operational capability gaps. However, this is unlikely on a scale that would enable the SFRS to put in place a sufficient high reach vehicle capability (a maximum of two SFRS high reach vehicles may be available from On-Call stations during IA) or other specialist capabilities such as water rescue, line rescue and urban search and rescue.
30. At its IATAG meeting on 13 January 2023, the SFRS decided not to use the capacity of this private supplier due to logistical support challenges and the potential for interoperability and safety issues to develop within the SFRS command and control structures during IA. Whilst we accept that the use of this resource may have brought with it some significant challenge, it could also provide benefits and may have assisted in providing specialist capability cover that may otherwise be unavailable.
31. **Recommendation 2 – The SFRS should fully consider all options available for the provision of emergency cover, including those that may be available via private fire service providers, in pursuance of its duties under section 9(2a) of the Act. The SFRS should maintain an ongoing awareness of resources that may be available from private providers and consider this option as part of its ongoing review of BCP arrangements. This is particularly relevant when no realistic, planned alternative for operational capability gaps can be put in place prior to IA.**

Resilience Contracts

32. Resilience contracts, which are in place in other Services in the UK, see firefighters committing to provide emergency cover in the event of IA. These arrangements may be entered into on a voluntary basis and would attract additional payment. Benefits of this solution are that it is relatively cost effective and ensures that competent personnel, already within the workforce, are available for deployment. Currently the SFRS does not operate resilience contracts. The SFRS adopted an approach to its preparations that considered events that follow any period of IA and actively sought a deconfliction approach. The SFRS considers resilience contracts as being potentially subject to legal challenge, and may not fit its IA deconfliction approach. There also remained a potential planning risk that having accepted resilience contracts, firefighters did not report for duty during periods of IA. This lack of certainty could lead to a situation where payments are made in times of industrial harmony and do not prove fruitful in times of industrial unrest. For these reasons, the SFRS did not consider resilience contracts as an effective option for use during IA and discounted them at an early stage in their planning.

Recruitment of Emergency Crews

33. Recruitment of emergency crews of 'Auxiliary firefighters' was discussed at IATAG. This approach would effectively mean that the SFRS would advertise for, employ, train and equip, people from various walks of life who may have no prior experience in the fire service or indeed any similar agency. These individuals would be given a basic training course and then engaged to cover periods of IA. Emergency crews of Auxiliary firefighters with a basic level of training could only reasonably be expected to provide limited support within the firefighter role. Use of Auxiliary crews presented significant challenges that would in our opinion have been insurmountable, for both SFRS and Military fire appliance crews. Several UK Fire and Rescue Services have actively sought to recruit emergency crews and while the levels of advertised remuneration varies, they are considerable on a per head basis. Utilisation of emergency crews was considered by the SFRS IATAG, but the option was deemed not appropriate and discounted for several reasons surrounding safety, for both this potential staff group and Scotland's communities. HMFSI support the SFRS in this decision.

Military Aid to the Civil Authorities

34. The Ministry of Defense (MOD), through the Armed Forces, can support UK Civil Authorities through Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA). Within the SFRS resourcing options for maintaining operational response during IA, one option was to make a request for MACA for military personnel to crew fire appliances.
35. Engagement between the MOD Joint Regional Liaison Officer (JRLO) and the SFRS, to discuss the availability of military personnel support during any IA, began in July 2022. A MACA request was formalised in December 2022 with a recommendation of support from the JRLO. Training for military personnel was scheduled to be conducted over 10 days and would have been delivered by SFRS personnel on MOD estate sites. Once IA dates were confirmed, training would have commenced to ensure military personnel were trained to the required standard.
36. It is highly likely during periods of IA that SFRS resources will be severely depleted across urban areas of Scotland. The utilisation of military resourced appliances from identified MOD estate sites would have reduced the level of risk to communities during IA. However MACA would not have replicated the level of emergency response that the SFRS normally provides for the communities of Scotland. Military personnel provided as a result of this MACA request would only have engaged in external firefighting. They would not have entered any premises on fire (structural firefighting) and would not be trained in the use of Breathing Apparatus (BA) that can enable operations to be conducted safely in irrespirable smoke-filled atmospheres.
37. In addition to fires, the SFRS has a legislative requirement to provide an appropriate response to other operational incidents i.e. road traffic collisions, incidents involving hazardous materials, search and rescue from collapsed structures, flooding (and the rescue of people trapped by flood water) and incidents on major transport systems. Military personnel provided under this MACA request would not have been trained or prepared to respond to these types of incidents.

38. While MACA resources would have provided a degree of operational fire cover, with fire appliances crewed by military personnel being available across Scotland, there would still have been a significant impact upon normal capabilities that the SFRS can bring to bear for emergency calls. The SFRS' ability to respond in an appropriate way to incidents of the type set out in its legislative functions, would therefore have been highly challenged.
39. Any emergency response would also be subject to longer than normal appliance journey response times due to reduced resources and military crews travelling at normal road speeds and across greater distances than would normally be the case. Reduced capabilities would include high reach appliances, water rescue resources, hazardous materials incidents resources, line rescue capability, rescue from water etc. and this would represent a risk to the communities of Scotland.
40. This loss of specialist capabilities may have been able to be addressed in an incremental way on the day of any IA dependent upon SFRS personnel who elected not to take part in the strike action. The difficulty is that the exact number of people choosing to work, their geographical location, and specific skills and attributes, could not be accurately determined until the day of the IA.
41. MACA resources would therefore have formed the foundation of the available operational response to emergency calls in geographical areas out with normal On-Call response station areas i.e. predominately urban areas across Scotland.
The extant options, and those considered by the SFRS IATAG as most feasible for the maintenance of emergency cover in urban areas would therefore have been:
 - Armed Forces support through Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA).
 - Utilisation of operational staff who opt not to be involved in IA.

Industrial Action Alternative Mobilising Locations

42. Wholetime firefighters and other identified personnel resources (such as military personnel) available to work during IA would have been mobilised from Alternative Mobilising Locations (AMLs) and not from SFRS wholetime fire stations.
43. Twenty-six AML sites, on the MOD Estate, were identified and checked to ensure their suitability for the location and mobilisation of fire appliances. Consideration was also given to the welfare needs of personnel operating from these locations.
44. The SFRS is utilising an IT based system called ArcGIS and is currently developing a model that will support the Fire and Rescue Service to accurately assess where potential future operational activity will occur based on a wide range of historical data layers. The AML geographical locations were selected using a range of risk information that the SFRS compiled e.g., historical operational activity, site specific risk information, likely appliance run times to incidents etc. These factors were input to the ArcGIS system and then considered by Operational Managers, before plotting the most appropriate locations for operational resources to be placed.
45. The ArcGIS system for IA used a twenty-minute appliance run time which is significantly higher than what SFRS appliances would normally achieve out with periods of IA. Military personnel crewed appliances would not have mobilised under blue light driving conditions during IA; this would have been another significant inhibitory factor in terms of emergency appliance response times. When military crewed appliances were mobilised the SFRS planning assumption was for them to be accompanied by an SFRS officer who would travel in a separate vehicle to an incident locus. We consider that where resources permitted, these arrangements should be adhered to during periods of IA, thus ensuring that expert advice and guidance via SFRS personnel is offered to military personnel during incidents they may attend.
46. If during the time of IA, available resources fall short of expectation then the ArcGIS system can quickly recalculate optimal AMLs for operational fire appliances to be located. The utilisation of AMLs was predicated in the main on the availability of military personnel. ArcGIS is not a dynamic system, but we believe expert operators should be considered for placing on standby at suitable estate locations during periods of IA to make these changes as required.
47. At the time of carrying out the fieldwork for this report, the exact nature of any IA that might have taken place was unknown. Based on experience from previous IA it was considered likely that actions could range from complete withdrawal of labour for a fixed period up to eight days in length, or a series of short duration strikes where resources would be withdrawn for between one and four hours during the working day.
48. Military resources requested under MACA would have enabled two shifts of twenty fire appliances for full day duration, should the IA have been a withdrawal of labour for a full day or longer. The same resources could have been used to provide up to forty appliances, if that was deemed appropriate from an operational planning perspective,

for shorter duration strikes. The difference being that rest periods would require to be factored into the longer duration IA options, hence twenty appliances per shift.

49. As noted within this inspection report, there would have been an element of planning and execution for deployment of SFRS personnel who opted to work during IA that could only be achieved when the IA period began, and the numbers of firefighters and FDOs could be confirmed. During the inspection process, and following SFRS workforce consultation, the number of wholetime firefighters based in urban areas who had indicated a willingness to work during IA was extremely low. The SFRS shared details of their planning tool for FDO availability with the inspection team. The number of FDOs who had indicated a willingness to work during IA via their normal work patterns was reduced from normal levels. We consider that sufficient capacity for this critical group could be achieved during IA, albeit reduced when compared to BAU.
50. To deploy personnel most effectively, the SFRS had adopted a hierarchical approach in terms of AML stand up and the fire appliances and specialist capabilities that could be crewed and so utilised for emergency calls should sufficient numbers of firefighters elect to work during periods of IA.
51. As stated above, the potential to have additional fire appliances and specialist capabilities provided by SFRS personnel existed but could not be accurately factored into planning assumptions until periods of IA begin. We conclude that IA over a period of consecutive days would be extremely challenging in terms of putting in place and maintaining SFRS capabilities and FDO cover across a range of functions which are set out in current planning arrangements.
52. Loss of specialist capabilities could be mitigated using the SFRS Community Asset Register (CAR). The CAR holds details of a wide range of assets that can be called upon to assist with SFRS emergency response activity e.g. local mountain rescue teams, local and national water rescue teams, International Rescue etc. The CAR and its assets are available to be used by SFRS Operational Commanders across Scotland.
53. The SFRS contacted all of the named national agencies and volunteer organisations on the CAR and were in the process of collating their availability and capacity to assist with emergency response during any periods of IA. The SFRS anticipated receipt of all CAR organisations responses in advance of the anticipated first potential date for IA, and gave an undertaking to fully inform us of these.
54. Robust business rules for the utilisation of CAR resources e.g. contact upon receipt of an emergency call, mobilisation, command and control at incident scene etc. were being developed by the SFRS in preparation for any IA. These business rules had not yet been fully defined at the time of carrying out this inspection. The outstanding CAR issues were being investigated by SFRS. We consider that this work is important and should continue until completion as it may allow gaps in capabilities during IA to be partially addressed for water rescue, line rescue and rescue from collapsed structures etc.
55. **Recommendation 3 – The SFRS should continue to develop robust Business Rules for use of Community Asset Register resources during IA. These rules should be developed by the Service and promulgated to IA OC staff as well as FDOs in advance of any IA to ensure that they are clearly understood.**

Response to Major Incidents and Core Emergency Response During IA

56. The FBU announced on 4 January 2023 that it had come to an agreement with the NJC for Local Authority Fire and Rescue Services in the UK to allow firefighters who are taking part in IA in the UK, including Scotland, to respond within parameters to a declared Major Incident. The arrangements for this are set out in the 'National Joint Council for Local Authority Fire and Rescue Services circular 2/2022 (Appendix 2: Scotland) Responses to Major Incidents During Periods of Strike Action'².
57. Arrangements for the return to work of OC staff, and the mobilisation of operational firefighters who are engaged in strike action, require to be agreed locally and to be robust in nature. At the time of carrying out this inspection, these mobilisation arrangements were being developed by the SFRS and the FBU (Scotland). The fact that both parties were willing to engage positively in these discussions is encouraging. However, major incidents occur only rarely for the SFRS. Incidents resulting in risk to the safety and life of persons within Scotland on the other hand are much more likely and this level of risk exists in a wide range of incidents, such as fires in houses or other buildings or road traffic accidents, that occur daily.
58. It was widely reported within the UK media that striking Ambulance staff in England continued to respond to all Category 1 life threatening incidents and Level 2 calls where these related to strokes and heart attacks. These calls are referred to as Life and Limb incidents and this term is relevant to potential Fire Service IA.
59. The absence of trained SFRS crews available during IA across urban areas of Scotland has already been set out in this report. Of particular concern is the delay in response to fire incidents involving persons within buildings that require to be rescued by firefighters wearing BA. Equally concerning are the probable longer emergency appliance response times in urban areas to road traffic collisions where trapped persons may require specialist assistance.
60. The military personnel who crew appliances which may be required to mobilise to these incident types, would not be trained to deal with these events effectively. Undoubtedly, military personnel who responded to these incident types would face unenviable moral choices, the outcomes of which could potentially bring negative outcomes for both the SFRS and for firefighters taking part in IA. These types of incidents are foreseeable and data layers, based on historical operational activity, for the ArcGIS system can effectively plot where they are most likely to occur.
61. We would urge a similar approach is taken in relation to Life and Limb calls as that which has been agreed in relation to Major Incidents. Mobilising criteria for Life and Limb emergency calls could be agreed, and the communications and mobilising processes that would enable firefighters engaged in IA to respond to these incidents could be modelled upon the details of NJC Circular 2/2022. Whilst IA has been avoided on this occasion, the SFRS should continue to engage with the FBU in this regard.
62. **Recommendation 4 – The SFRS should continue to engage with local FBU representatives to develop a common approach to mobilising to a range of incidents during times of IA.**

² [responding during strike action – scotland -app 2 – final.pdf \(fbu.org.uk\)](#)

Arrangements for Handling Emergency Calls During IA

63. The OC element of any Fire Service emergency incident is critical in ensuring successful emergency operational responses. OC personnel take emergency 999 calls that are passed to them by BT, scrutinise the details of the call to gather all relevant information, dispatch any pre-determined attendance of fire appliances to the incident and then coordinate all aspects of the logistics response on behalf of the on-scene incident commander. Normal day to day OC working provides the SFRS with a fully functional model that enables effective command and control for several concurrent incidents across Scotland on a 24-hour basis.
64. In line with the SFRS deconfliction approach, IATAG determined that OC staff choosing to work during any planned IA should operate from a non-SFRS site. Through liaison and consultation with Police Scotland, the IA OC lead officers secured the use of a facility which has much of the required command-and-control communications network infrastructure already installed. A twelve position IA OC was established and equipped. Testing of telecommunications systems was successfully completed in December 2022. We consider the arrangements that were put in place by the SFRS via the IATAG to be robust and effective.
65. Several layers of resilience were built in to ensure that emergency calls would be successfully directed to the IA OC in the event of strike action being initiated. The IA OC required four hours to set up. Emergency calls that would normally have been directed to SFRS OCs were able to be switched using alternative systems within 45 minutes. This would have meant that on a planned basis, the temporary IA OC would be set up, personnel put in place at operator desks and the telecommunications links established circa four hours prior to any IA beginning. The SFRS has a high degree of confidence that the alternative IA OC will function as planned and be able to take receipt of emergency calls and dispatch emergency response from designated AMLs as required during any IA.
66. However, the successful operation of the OC infrastructure was predicated upon the required number of skilled personnel being available to receive calls and interrogate the information provided. As no Computer Aided Dispatch system would have been available, IA OC staff would be required to select appropriate appliance(s) from those available and manage normal operational radio messages to and from the fire ground. At the time of conducting this inspection, the numbers of OC staff who were likely to work during any IA could not be accurately determined via SFRS communications processes.
67. The number of staff who had indicated that they would be willing to work during IA was below that which was indicated to us to run the required 3 or 4 shifts across any 24-four-hour period for OC operations. Had this scenario played out, there was potential for OC FDOs who elected to work during the IA being drawn into processing emergency calls with a resultant impact upon their specialist capacity to perform other critical tasks. This could have represented a significant challenge to the SFRS's ability to resource the OC over a prolonged period of IA. At the time of conducting fieldwork for this inspection, the SFRS remained actively engaged in trying to ascertain the number of OC staff who may have been willing to work during IA.

68. The SFRS's planning to address this risk included training personnel to receive emergency calls and to support OC functions in a blended approach. At the time of conducting our fieldwork, the exact number of additional staff required to carry out these functions was unclear due to unreturned communications responses from OC personnel.
69. Critical elements of the OC process such as considering and initiating any emergency appliance mobilisation or Fire Survival Guidance would only have been undertaken by trained SFRS OC personnel. We do however consider, that any potential shortfall in suitably skilled OC firefighters and officers would have presented an element of risk for the SFRS during any IA. At the SFRS IATAG meeting held on 13 January 2023, a paper was presented requesting permission to seek further personnel support from within the SFRS. This paper was supported and the work to ensure suitably skilled staff were in place to support OC operations during IA was underway.
70. The OC planned to operate a risk-based mobilising hierarchy and complementary business rules, that would determine any operational appliance response. Mobilisation would have been achieved via recognised emergency services mobilising radio systems. The SFRS OC teams have substantial experience of applying similar approaches during spate operational conditions e.g. Bonfire Night, widespread flooding etc. Training for military personnel in the use of mobilising radios was contained within the SFRS training plan for this group. It was not envisaged that this would pose a challenge for the MACA nominated military personnel who are experienced in disciplined radio procedures. On-Call station mobilisations would have functioned in a near normal manner via specially configured laptop computers that are currently in use by OC personnel in a well-practiced way.
71. OC officers remained in close dialogue with the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) Mobilising Officers Group, and highlighted novel and innovative approaches that could be considered for use during IA into the SFRS IATAG. In steady state conditions, out with IA, a 'buddy' system operates for OC functions across the UK to offer mutual support should any catastrophic call handling failure occur. The SFRS buddy is Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. These buddy arrangements would not have been available during any IA.
72. Extensive end to end testing and exercising of the mobilising system up to receipt of calls and appliance designation for emergency response short of actual appliance movements, was conducted by the SFRS with Scottish Multi Agency Resilience Training and Exercise Unit (SMARTEU) colleagues.
73. We observed, during tabletop exercising attended by officers from across the SFRS, that a number of the solutions proposed to exercise scenarios were predicated upon BAU resources being in place. Whilst we understand work in this regard was well advanced at the time of writing, the SFRS should ensure that appropriate business rules, that set out the reality of working with reduced resource levels during IA, are fully developed for the use of all officers. Officers should be aware that BAU rules, in an operational context, would not apply during IA periods.

74. During IA, and despite planning and exercising by the SFRS and the OC teams, the OC Function would effectively have been reduced to a mobilising cell. Emergency calls would still have been able to be received and mobilisations made, but on a much-reduced scale and with an elongated time frame. To assist with the processing of emergency calls and the subsequent allocation of appropriate operational resources and capacity, the SFRS should continue to develop robust call challenging and/or call triage protocols to ensure that appropriate appliance mobilisations can be made in the event of future IA.

The Development of Safety Advice for the Public

75. Effective communications with the people of Scotland would have been vital in ensuring that appropriate safety messaging and information about the impacts of IA were understood. Recent strike action by Ambulance staff in England, which was preceded by targeted safety communications, coincided with a reduction in demand of up to 40% on the days of IA. Effective communications and messaging, regarding how members of the public could have used services ‘wisely’ during the Ambulance strikes, appears to have had a positive demand reduction impact.
76. We observed SFRS testing and exercising sessions as part of the field work for the IA inspection. During these sessions there was a clearly expressed need from participants for a comprehensive communications campaign to raise public awareness of the potential impacts of IA upon normal service delivery. Strong information messages explaining steps that the public (and business) should observe during IA could have assisted in reducing demand for non-urgent 999 calls and assisted with the maintenance of emergency operational response capacity.
77. The SFRS developed an intelligence led IA Communications Plan using the UK Government’ best practice OASIS planning model framework. An IA Communications Cell was formed and met each week following the SFRS IATAG. This group ensured that any communications requirements generated by the IATAG were considered and acted upon in a formal governance environment. The Communications Cell would have been stood up and remained active during periods of IA.
78. A senior SFRS Communications Team manager participated as part of the NFCC Communications Group. All advice from this group was considered and integrated into the planned SFRS public and business safety messaging. The aim for the SFRS was to deliver a live and responsive communications campaign that considered issues in advance or as they occurred, and which was nimble enough to address any safety issues effectively during the IA period.
79. The SFRS had a series of communications that were planned for release as part of an overall campaign in the run up to and then during any IA. The view held by communications professionals within the Service was that these communications needed to be timed for release to ensure maximum impact. A range of communications channels would have been used for delivery, including social media platforms, other digital platforms and TV, through the support of the Scottish Government.
80. We considered that an effective communications campaign, delivered in advance of and during any IA, would be critical to reducing demand for SFRS services. The delivery of the communications campaign was viewed as a priority by the SFRS.

The Development of Safety Advice for Business Premises

81. The SFRS planned to run a postal campaign and forward a letter to business premises across Scotland in advance of any IA. These letters would set out what a reduction in services could have meant, ask that the premise's Fire Risk Assessment be reviewed, and if necessary that additional measures be put in place. Additionally, as BAU, the Service sits on a wide range of working groups on a sectoral basis e.g. the care sector. Safety messages would have been delivered via these working groups to partner agencies and their premises. The SFRS had Prevention and Protection (P&P) representation on the NFCC strategic forum, and this ensured that national guidance from this group was considered, and where appropriate, formed part of the planned IA communications.
82. Across Scotland there are premises that are considered high risk by the Service's Fire Safety Enforcement (FSE) team. We were informed by SFRS that all high-risk premises were, as part of a planned programme, visited and audited by FSE personnel by the end of January 2023. These audits ensured that considered and appropriate safety steps could be put in place based on inspection findings, and in advance of any IA.
83. As described previously, the SFRS had prepared a wide-ranging communications plan that was timed to be launched in the run up to IA. Within the communications plan there were elements that related to business premises safety.
84. We observed SFRS IA testing and exercising sessions as part of the field work for this Inspection. During these sessions there was a clearly expressed request from the SFRS participants for a comprehensive Communications campaign to raise awareness of safety messaging that businesses (and the public) should observe during any IA. It was recognised that effective messaging could assist with the maintenance of emergency response capacity, if businesses could reduce their demand for non-urgent 999 telephone calls (as was to be defined within the OC business rules) or automatic fire alarm calls.

Maintenance of SFRS Key Business Services

85. During IA there was always the potential for SFRS services to be called upon at short or no notice to address issues relating to FSE for business premises or for a safety critical issue affecting a member of the community. To address issues of this type there are trained SFRS support staff members working within the FSE team as premises auditors who would conduct this function for business premises. FDOs who worked during periods of IA would have offered managerial advice as required for these instances.
86. The SFRS has a non-uniformed support staff Community Action Team (CAT), trained to address any high-risk issues relating to the safety of members of the community within their homes. The CAT regularly conduct Home Fire Safety Visits, offer safety advice, fit smoke alarms, and collaboratively work with partner agencies who may be able to assist with making people safer in their homes from the dangers from fire or other safety issues.

SFRS Significant Operational Risk Sites and Appliance Mobilisations

87. The SFRS IATAG tasked each Local Senior Officer (LSO) within the Service to compile the main operational risks within their areas. These risks were used to form an information layer for the SFRS ArcGIS, which plotted the most advantageous locations for IA AMLs. An OC risk information layer was also added to the ArcGIS, which would have allowed SFRS Operational Intelligence information to be accessed by the OC IA mobilising cell during emergency calls. A demonstration of the ArcGIS system was provided for the inspection team as part of our fieldwork.
88. The OC team produced a set of business rules that were to be applied when answering any emergency call during IA. There would have been a strong focus by the IA OC on the maintenance of SFRS statutory responsibilities, in terms of what emergency incident mobilisations could realistically be made, with the reduced levels of appliances available. This focus would have been particularly acute in geographical areas that established AMLs for military crews of fire appliances.
89. During IA, the OC planned to initiate emergency call triaging. This would focus on the most appropriate use of available appliances and address the greatest level of risk to the safety of people. Priority was to be given to fire and non-fire incidents that involved persons who were trapped and in need of assistance. For these calls, a mobilisation would always be made as a priority by the OC, dependent upon fire appliance availability. The next level of priority would be for fires within buildings (or which threaten buildings), or non-fire incidents such as road traffic collisions, which did not involve people. Mobilisation to these incidents would be made but would also be dependent upon fire appliance availability.
90. Two further levels of priority were to be used for more minor incidents. Examples of these two levels included rubbish burning in an open field or a minor road traffic collisions with no persons injured, or secondly an automatic fire alarm with no signs of fire at a business premises etc. For these two levels of priority, the IA OC would have taken a decision to queue the call until resources became available or decided that no mobilisation should be made. All mobilising decisions were to be logged within the IA OC and all associated emergency calls, and their outcomes recorded.

Conclusion

91. Faced with the very real possibility of industrial unrest resulting from a National pay dispute, the SFRS diverted significant resources and human capital towards the planning for any potential IA. In taking the approach that it did, the SFRS maintained strategic control on IA planning arrangements through its IATAG with direct oversight from its Senior Leadership Team. The work of the IATAG was supported by a wide range of sub-groups. All of these assisted the SFRS to ensure that appropriate planning and testing of arrangements, over a period of many months, was undertaken in advance of any IA. IA planning became an area that required significant focus for the SFRS from July 2022 until the time when the latest pay offer was accepted in March 2023.
92. Having considered the arrangements in place, and actions taken by the SFRS in response to the threat of IA, we accept that the Service gave significant consideration to a range of options as it planned for responding to emergency incidents across Scotland. During IA, the SFRS would have had in place arrangements on which it would have made logical emergency appliance mobilisations. We acknowledge the wide-ranging work and effort that has gone into the development of a response model to provide resources to a range of incidents. However, we also conclude that in some areas of Scotland there would have been a significant reduction in available operational appliances, a reduced level of operational capabilities and a large reduction in available skilled personnel who would normally respond to emergency calls. As a consequence of this, communities and businesses in Scotland may have been exposed to an increased level of risk during the IA.
93. In conclusion, we accept that the Service took appropriate steps to consider available options for the maintenance of resources, and for offsetting risk during IA. While we support the direction taken, this Inspection Report has made recommendations for the SFRS to consider. We are pleased that IA has been avoided on this occasion and would urge the Service to reflect on this experience in an effort to learn valuable lessons and ensure Business Continuity Arrangements are robust, regularly reviewed, and routinely practiced.

Glossary of Terms

AML	Alternative Mobilising Location
BAU	Business as Usual
BCP	Business Continuity Plan
Call Triaging	A process that uses Business Rules to establish if an emergency appliance mobilisation will be made during IA.
CAT	Community Action Team
FDO	Flexi Duty Officer
FSE	Fire Safety Enforcement
HMFSI	His Majesty's Fire Service Inspectorate in Scotland
IA	Industrial Action
IATAG	Industrial Action Tactical Action Group
JRLO	Joint Regional Liaison Officer (MOD)
MOD	Ministry of Defence
NFCC	National Fire Chiefs Council
OC	Operations Control
P&P	Prevention and Protection
SMARTEU	Scottish Multi Agency Resilience Training and Exercise Unit



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