

Best Value in fire and rescue services in Scotland

Overview report



Prepared for the Accounts Commission
July 2012



The Accounts Commission

The Accounts Commission is a statutory, independent body which, through the audit process, requests local authorities in Scotland to achieve the highest standards of financial stewardship and the economic, efficient and effective use of their resources. The Commission has four main responsibilities:

- securing the external audit, including the audit of Best Value and Community Planning
- following up issues of concern identified through the audit, to ensure satisfactory resolutions
- carrying out national performance studies to improve economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local government
- issuing an annual direction to local authorities which sets out the range of performance information they are required to publish.

The Commission secures the audit of 32 councils and 45 joint boards and committees (including police and fire and rescue services).

Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000 under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000. It provides services to the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission. Together they ensure that the Scottish Government and public sector bodies in Scotland are held to account for the proper, efficient and effective use of public funds.

Contents

Summary Page 2

Introduction

Key messages
Page 3

Part 1. Context Page 6

Part 2. Governance and management Page 10

Key messages

Vision and strategic direction

The role of elected members
Page 11

Integrated Risk Management Planning
Page 13

Community engagement

Partnership working
Page 15

Performance management

Continuous improvement
Page 17

Part 3. Use of resources Page 19

Costs and efficiencies
Page 20

Financial management

Shared services
Page 21

Procurement
Page 22

Asset management and ICT

Buildings
Page 23

Fleet

Information and Communications Technology (ICT)
Page 24

Sustainability
Page 25

Part 4. Workforce management Page 27

Key messages

How services manage their workforce
Page 28

Towards a more diverse workforce
Page 29

Retained firefighters
Page 33

Part 5. Service performance Page 34

Key messages

Number of fires and casualties

Prevention
Page 35

Home fire safety visits (HFSVs)
Page 36

Fire prevention in businesses
Page 37

Emergency response
Page 38

Response times
Page 39

Appendix 1. Future improvement Page 41

Summary



Introduction

1. Local authorities in Scotland, including fire and rescue, have a statutory duty to deliver Best Value in their services. This requires them to establish management arrangements, aimed at securing continuous improvements in their performance while maintaining an appropriate balance between quality and cost.

2. Since 2004, Audit Scotland has carried out audits of Best Value in each of the 32 councils in Scotland and in most police authorities. These audits have helped to improve performance and accountability in local government and have brought unsatisfactory performance to the public's attention through the public reporting process.

3. Some elements of Best Value have been covered in earlier audits of fire and rescue, in particular *Scottish Fire Service: Verification of the progress of modernisation*, published in 2004, and *A review of service reform in Scottish fire and rescue authorities*, published in 2007. But, in 2011, following a consultation with stakeholders, the Accounts Commission decided that a dedicated audit of Best Value should be extended to each of the fire and rescue authorities in Scotland.

4. The Scottish Government had signalled a potential restructuring of fire and rescue services. So we recognised that the audits needed to be proportionate, seeking to identify the main strengths that should be retained and any significant weaknesses that would need to be addressed, whatever the future structure of fire and rescue services. The Scottish Government has subsequently announced a commitment to establish a single fire and rescue service for Scotland by April 2013.

5. This report draws on the findings of the recent Best Value audits of Scotland's eight fire and rescue services (available on our website, www.audit-scotland.gov.uk). It focuses

on the opportunities and challenges facing fire and rescue as it moves towards a single national service. The report sets out the many strengths that have emerged through the local audit work. It also highlights the opportunities that exist to better use resources, such as crews, stations and equipment, and improve fire and rescue services for local communities. In the report we also acknowledge some of the challenges that exist in bringing together eight very different services into a single organisation.

Key messages

- Scotland's fire and rescue services play a vital role in helping to ensure the safety of their local communities. In recent years, the existing eight fire and rescue services have continued to provide an effective emergency response at the same time as taking on a wider remit. This goes beyond fighting domestic and commercial fires to include road traffic collisions, flooding, and civil emergencies. In addition, they have played a much greater role in giving safety advice to businesses, households, schools and the wider community. The new national Scottish Fire and Rescue Service will inherit many aspects of strong performance. There are, however, marked differences in how the existing eight services manage their resources and deliver fire and rescue services. These differences cannot be explained solely by local needs and context. This will present both opportunities and challenges for creating a new national service for Scotland.
- Real progress has been made since 2004 in establishing Integrated Risk Management Planning (IRMP), providing each service with a structured approach to identifying community risks and prioritising their use of resources. This has helped drive an increasing focus on their preventative role. Much of this has been carried out in partnership with other public sector bodies, such as police, housing services, and schools. Over this period, services have overseen a steady reduction in the number of fires and casualties, with around 23 per cent fewer house fires and 33 per cent fewer casualties than a decade ago. As a result, around 30 fewer people die in fires each year. All this has been achieved at a time of significant reductions in budgets and uncertainty about the future structure of the service in Scotland.
- Despite this success, fire and rescue services still need to overcome significant challenges:
 - The numbers of fires and casualties in Scotland have fallen, but not as quickly as in other parts of the UK.
 - The level of house fires and deaths is almost double the rate in England and Wales.
 - Five of the Scottish services are among the six most expensive in the UK, but the reasons for this are not sufficiently well understood.
- Some of the factors leading to these differences are beyond the direct control of fire and rescue services. High levels of deprivation, associated with poor housing and high levels of smoking and alcohol abuse, help drive higher rates of incidents and casualties. The remoteness of rural and island communities help drive higher costs. But more needs to be done to understand why Scotland's services are relatively expensive.

- Fire and rescue services need to do more to improve how they use public money and assess the impact of their work. There have been some shifts in how services use resources to better match priorities, but the pace of change has been slow. Eight years after the introduction of IRMP, the deployment of fire stations and firefighters is still essentially based on historic factors, rather than any objective assessment of current risks. Sometimes, this simply reflects the costs of building new stations or closing or merging existing facilities, with practical compromises needing to be made. But, in many other cases, there has not been an appetite for taking difficult decisions.
- Councillors, sitting on fire and rescue boards, have a responsibility for overseeing services and are expected to work corporately, considering the needs of the community as a whole. But they are also elected to represent the needs of their local area. In general, they have not provided strong strategic leadership, particularly in the use of resources. To some extent, this reflects the lack of training, policy analysis and administrative support provided for them. Councillors understandably feel the need to respond to concerns from local communities and, to some extent, staff. But there are examples where campaigns to preserve existing local services and staff terms and conditions have overwhelmed proposals to use resources more effectively. Changing public services is never easy, especially when they are valued by local communities. However, the financial pressures facing the service are likely to lead to the need for significant service change in the longer term. It is, therefore, essential that the

new Scottish Fire and Rescue Service finds ways of engaging effectively with communities and the workforce over service change.

- While board members have a formal role in approving plans and budgets and monitoring performance, fire and rescue remains a largely officer-led service. At a strategic level, it tends to be senior officers who provide the drive for change. They provide the leadership needed in implementing IRMPs, setting standards and policies, and ensuring that firefighters are properly trained and equipped. A hierarchical culture, associated with all uniformed services, helps ensure that this 'can-do' attitude cascades down to station managers and firefighters. Each service has a strong identity and history, encouraging a marked commitment to the organisation and to providing a high-quality service to the public.
- The strong internal leadership within fire and rescue services brings many strengths. But it also means that each service tends to work in isolation. At an operational level, partnership working is strong. For example, services readily provide support for major incidents in neighbouring areas. At a strategic level, chief fire officers meet regularly and develop common understandings on a wide range of policy areas. However, despite all these examples, the relationship between services tends to be one of friendly competition rather than active collaboration. There are very few examples of shared support services, with each service having its own departments for areas such as human resources, finance, procurement and estates. There are no common Information and Communications Technology

(ICT) systems and services use a wide range of fire engines, breathing apparatus and other equipment. Clear efficiencies are available from rationalising these basic arrangements.

- Beneath the consensus on high-level objectives for the fire and rescue service there are significant differences in how services are delivered locally. These cannot be explained solely by differences in the local context. Across the country there are striking differences in:
 - the number and location of fire stations, even in areas with similar characteristics
 - approaches to and the balance between prevention and emergency response
 - how services measure and assess their performance
 - the role of full-time, retained and volunteer firefighters, and non-uniformed staff
 - crewing levels on fire engines
 - shift patterns for firefighters.
- This diversity presents both opportunities and challenges in creating a new national fire and rescue service. The opportunity exists to draw from the best practices that are spread throughout the country. The challenge lies in harmonising approaches while remaining sensitive to local needs. It is likely to take many years, for example, to fully integrate ICT systems and develop a common approach to crewing levels and shift patterns. However, by drawing on the best examples of innovation and good practice, there is an opportunity to create a world-class fire and rescue service for Scotland.

- The new service will also need to consider a new model for retained firefighters. These on-call staff form around 40 per cent of front-line firefighters and provide an essential and cost-effective service, particularly in rural areas. Every service, however, has concerns about the sustainability of the current system. There are significant difficulties in recruiting enough retained firefighters and ensuring they are properly trained and able to work safely. Individually, services have tried various short-term solutions, but there may be a need to look outside Scotland for a more radical overhaul of the terms and conditions for retained firefighters.
- A wide range of issues needs to be addressed over the coming months and years in creating a new national fire and rescue service for Scotland. In the short term, existing board members and senior officers will have an important role in preparing their local organisations to be integrated within a national service. However, it is likely that they will leave the more difficult decisions, such as the location and crewing of fire stations, to the national service. A shift from a local to a national service will not make these decisions any easier.

Part 1. Context



The contribution of fire and rescue services

6. Fire and rescue services provide a vital contribution to community safety. They provide an emergency response to fires and a wide range of other incidents, such as road traffic collisions and flooding. In recent years, they have also increasingly carried out a more proactive and educational role in helping to prevent emergencies. Much of this work is carried out in partnership with public bodies such as schools and social work services, as well as police and ambulance emergency services.

7. These emergency and preventative services make an important contribution to Scotland's wider economic and environmental well-

being. Fire and rescue services, through fire inspections and emergency responses, help reduce the impact of fires on businesses. They also help reduce the environmental impact of fires, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and the damage to the environment from wildfires.

8. Since 2001, fire and rescue services have also made an important contribution to planning for major civil emergencies, including potential terrorist attacks. Through the New Dimensions programme, the Scottish Government has provided services with a range of new equipment, situated at strategic locations and designed to help provide a coordinated and national response to major incidents.

Current structure

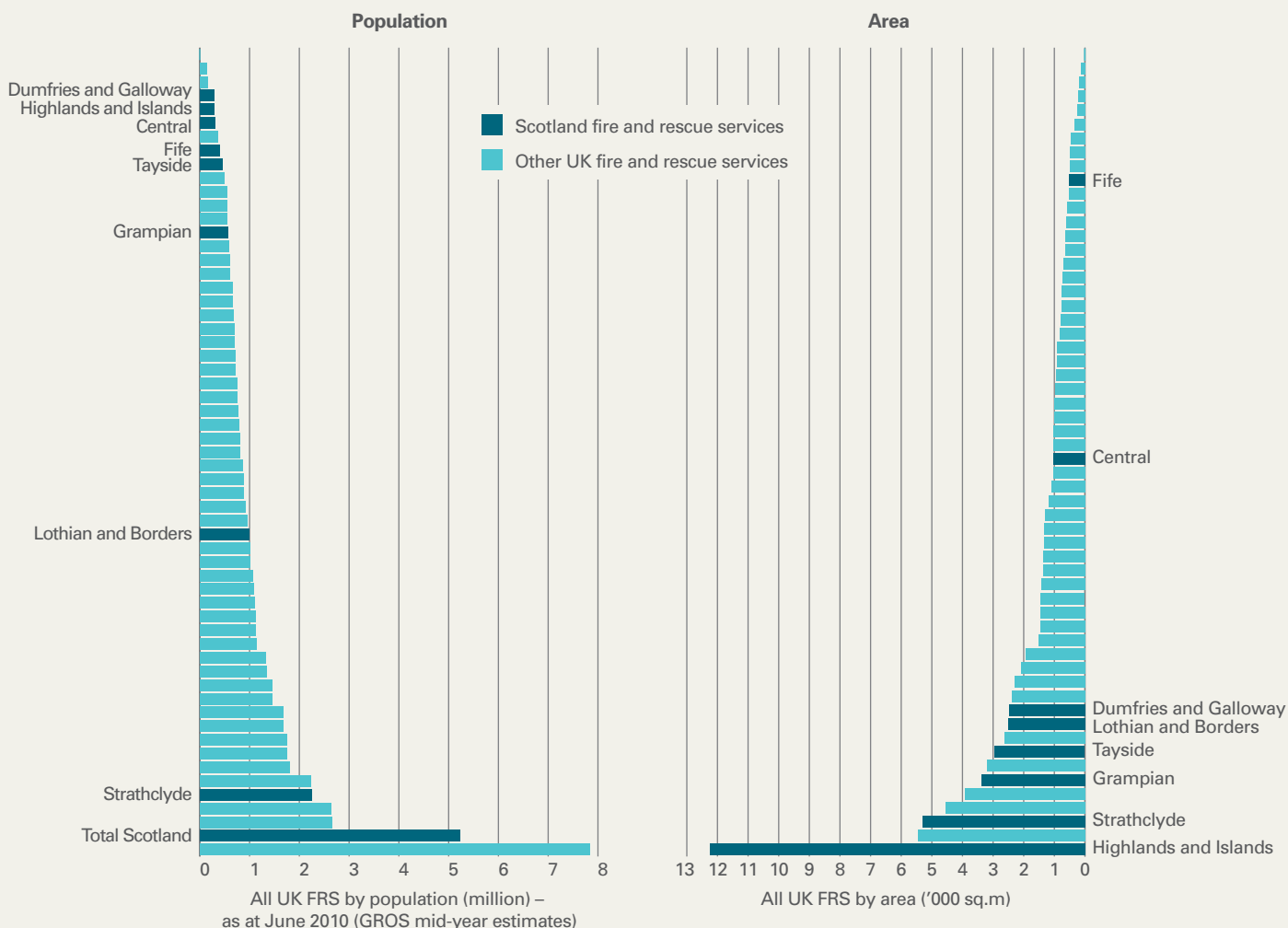
9. There are eight fire and rescue services in Scotland, which are part of local government. Two of these – Fife and Dumfries and Galloway – are directly managed as part of their local council. The remaining six are overseen by joint boards, made up of elected members from a group of local councils.

10. Compared to the rest of the UK, Scottish fire and rescue authorities tend to serve small populations spread across large geographical areas. In terms of population, Scotland has five of the eight smallest fire authorities in the UK. In contrast, it has six of the largest 11 by area (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1

UK fire and rescue services by population and by geographical area

Scottish fire and rescue services tend to serve relatively small populations but cover relatively large areas.



Source: Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) Statistical Returns and GROS mid-year estimates

11. The size of these services also varies considerably ([Exhibit 1](#)). Strathclyde Fire and Rescue serves around 43 per cent of Scotland’s population and is one of the largest in the UK. In contrast, Dumfries and Galloway serves only three per cent of the population. Highlands and Islands covers over 12,000 square miles, by far the largest area in the UK. But at only 512 square miles, Fife is one of the smallest.

12. Fire and rescue services are provided for widely different types of areas within Scotland, ranging from urban centres such as Glasgow and Edinburgh to remote and sparsely populated communities. To meet these different needs, services use a mixture of full-time and on-call firefighters. Full-time firefighters tend to be based in urban areas, where demand and community risk are greatest. In rural areas, on-call retained or volunteer firefighters are more commonly used. Around two-thirds of Scotland’s fire stations are staffed by retained or volunteer firefighters, with huge variations in their activity levels ([Exhibit 2](#)).

Fifty-five per cent of the fire stations in Scotland account for only five per cent of calls. Particularly in areas with low levels of activities, this can make it difficult for services to maintain firefighter skills.

The changing responsibilities of fire and rescue

13. Over the past decade, the responsibilities of fire and rescue services across the UK have changed significantly. Their role now goes well beyond simply providing an emergency response to fires.

14. At the same time, fire and rescue services in the UK have moved away from national standards, with individual authorities having more discretion to develop targets and strategies that are more appropriate to local circumstances. As part of that change, all authorities are required to establish IRMP, setting out local targets and objectives for reducing risks, balancing prevention and intervention and determining response standards and resource allocation.

15. With the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003, fire and rescue services were expected to work with other public bodies to promote community safety, helping to reduce the risks of fire, road traffic collisions and other incidents. The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 also gave fire and rescue services a role in responding to terrorist threats. This was followed by the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005, which, in addition to their existing emergency response services, gave fire and rescue authorities statutory responsibilities for preventative work.

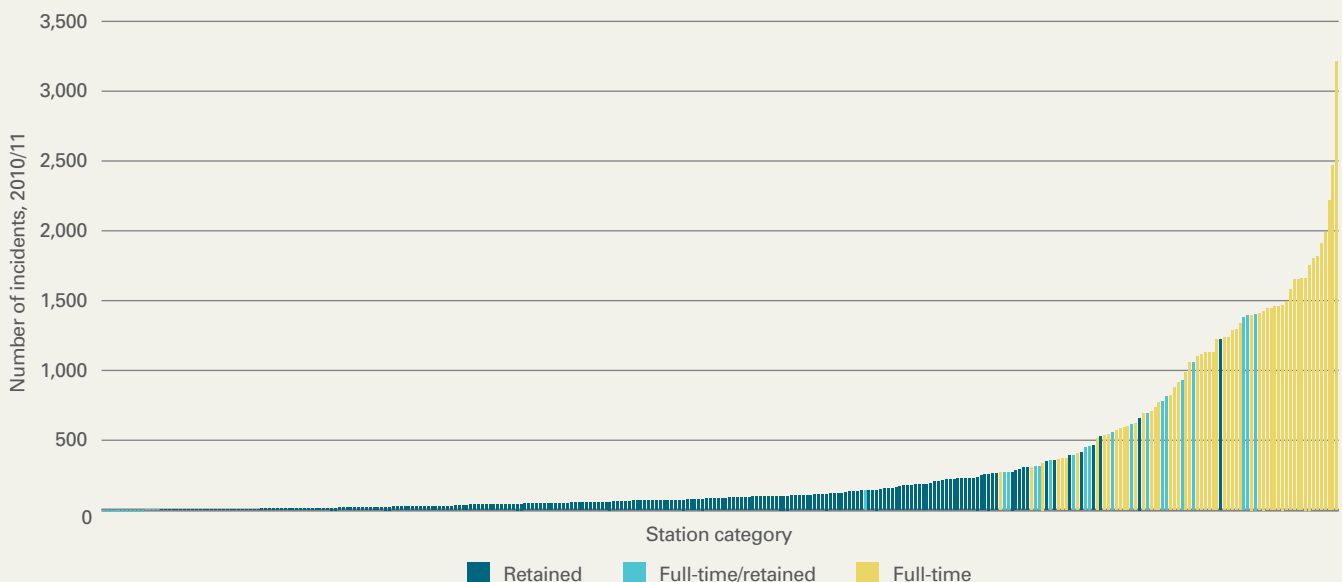
Number of fires and casualties

16. There is some evidence to show that this increasing emphasis on preventative work has had an impact. The number of fires and related casualties in Scotland has steadily declined over the past decade ([Exhibit 3](#)). Between 2001/02 and 2010/11, the number of accidental house fires fell by 23 per cent, from around 6,900 a year to around 5,300. Over the same period, fire-related casualties have fallen by 33 per cent and fire-related deaths have fallen from 67 to 38.

Exhibit 2

Station activity levels

There are huge variations in the activity levels of Scottish fire stations, with most staffed by on-call retained firefighters.



Source: Scottish Government

17. Despite this progress, the number of fires and casualties in Scotland remains around 40 per cent above the levels elsewhere within the UK. There are likely to be a number of reasons contributing to this higher rate of fires and casualties. The *Scotland Together* report, published in 2010, identified higher rates of deprivation, together with higher rates of smoking and alcohol abuse as important factors. But more needs to be done to understand why these differences persist.

The cost of Scotland's fire and rescue services

18. Scottish fire and rescue services spend around £372 million a year. Most is funded by local councils, but central government contributes around £60 million to fund pensions and a further £39 million to support national resilience projects, the Scottish Fire Services College, and capital projects.

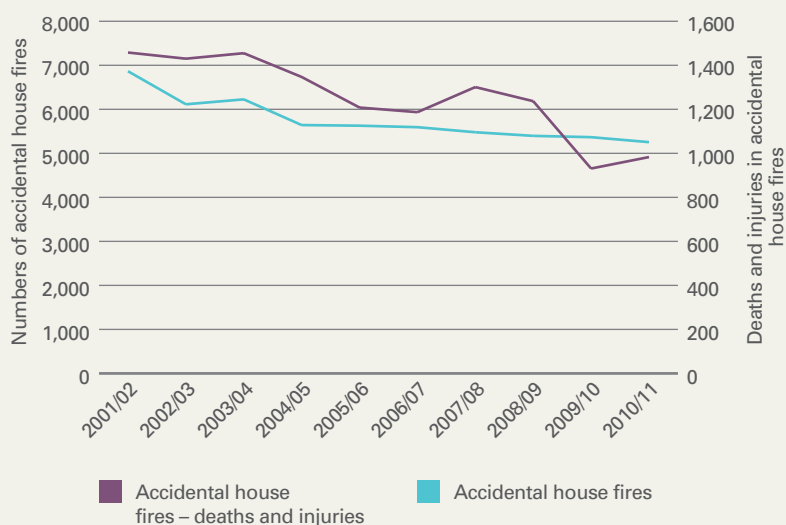
19. The costs of Scottish fire and rescue services are relatively high compared with other parts of the UK. This is similar to the pattern for some other public services, such as education and the NHS. In terms of

the costs per head of population, Scotland has five of the six most expensive services (*Exhibit 4*). There are a number of reasons that could account for this. The higher rates of fires and therefore higher demands on Scottish fire and rescue services,

identified earlier, is undoubtedly one important factor. In addition, it can be expensive to provide a service to sparsely populated areas and remote island communities. But these factors alone do not explain the variation in costs within Scotland.

Exhibit 3

The number of fires and casualties has declined

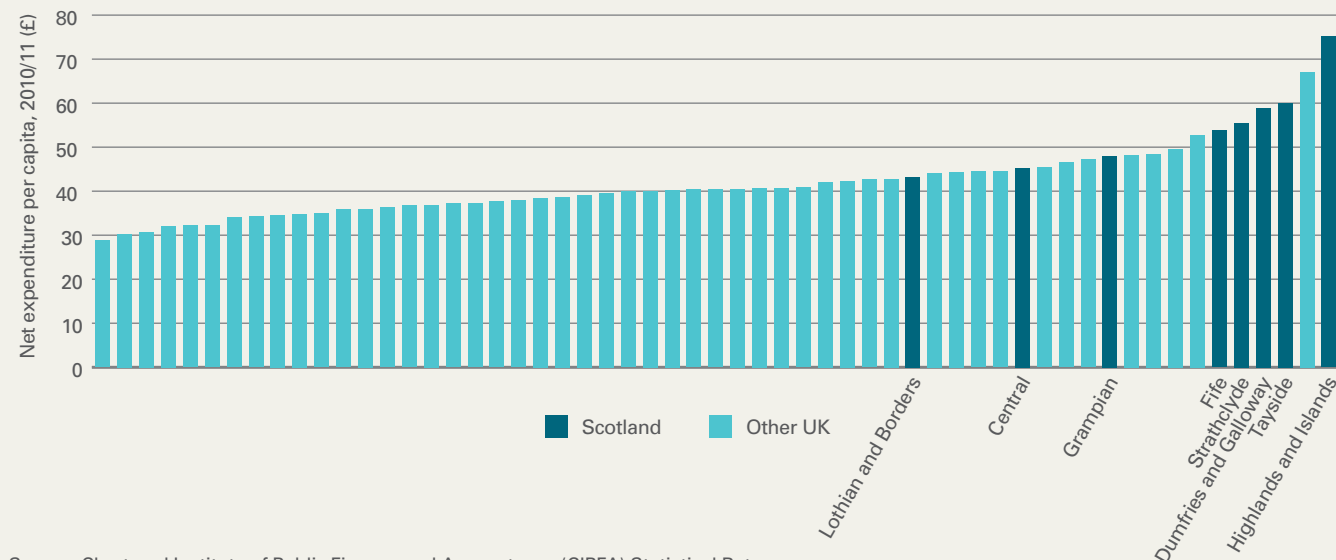


Source: Scottish Government Statistical Bulletin and CLG Fire Statistics Monitor

Exhibit 4

Costs of UK fire and rescue services

Scottish fire and rescue services have high costs compared with other parts of the UK.



Source: Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) Statistical Returns

Part 2. Governance and management



Key messages

- Fire and rescue services share common high-level objectives, but vary considerably in how they are implemented locally. All services have established IRMP, but it is not consistently used to match resources, such as stations and firefighters, to community risks. Elected members do not have strong administrative or research support, relying to a large extent on senior officers to set strategic direction, and do not provide a strong independent challenge on how services are performing, and whether Best Value is being achieved.

Vision and strategic direction

Scottish fire and rescue services share common strategic objectives, but there is little agreement on how these are implemented.

20. Strong, effective leadership is key to strong performance. It sets the tone of the organisation and the pace for improvement and reform. Our audits found that each of the eight chief fire officers and their senior managers provide strong leadership within their services. Day-to-day operational management from officers is also good and fire and rescue services know what to do when faced with large-scale emergencies.

21. The Chief Fire Officers Association for Scotland (CFOAS) provides a degree of national coordination. Chief fire officers meet regularly and oversee various business initiatives, such as sustainability and performance management.

22. There is a consistency in the high-level objectives set out by each service. While each service expresses its strategic objectives in different ways, all share a common understanding of the importance of preventative work, reliable

emergency services, and a well-trained workforce. Similarly, services share a common set of strategic plans, all producing Integrated Risk Management Plans (IRMPs) and annual Service Improvement Plans.

23. However, there are significant differences in how the eight services implement these common high-level objectives. Despite the regular meetings of CFOAS and the strong cross-border assistance in emergencies, the relationship between the eight services is characterised by friendly competition rather than cooperation. CFOAS meetings can broadly agree policies but the interpretation and implementation of these policies is left to local discretion.

24. Operationally and technically fire and rescue services work well and their 'can do' culture works in their favour when faced with emergencies and crises. Firefighters often talk about working in a family culture. However, fire service culture can be too inward-looking and competitive rather than collaborative. Services can be insular and unaware of management arrangements in neighbouring services.

25. As a result, there are wide differences between the eight Scottish services in fundamental issues such as:

- the relative emphases they place on preventative and emergency response work
- the targets they set to help measure how they achieve their objectives
- how they use IRMP to helping decide how best to deploy fire stations and full-time, retained and volunteer firefighters.

The role of elected members

Elected members have limited administrative support and training and do not provide a clear role in setting strategic direction, or scrutinising how services are performing, and whether Best Value is being achieved.

26. The role of elected members can be complex and difficult. Unlike police authorities, there is no specific guidance for members of fire and rescue authorities. They are expected to work corporately, considering the needs of the community as a whole rather than narrow electoral or constituent council interests. But they are also elected to represent the needs of their local area. Members are also expected to contribute towards the strategic direction of services and provide independent scrutiny of performance, helping drive improvements and deliver Best Value.

27. Our audits found that councillors have a limited role in setting the strategic direction of fire and rescue services. They are very supportive of senior officers and have a high regard for the work carried out by firefighters. Some can also have a good understanding of community risk and the factors which influence this. In general, however, key decisions on strategic matters are taken by senior officers and then formally approved by elected members. Members tend not to take a leading role in setting priorities and agreeing lesser priorities. This is particularly important because, with continuing pressures on public finances, fire and rescue services may not be able to afford to do everything they currently do and will need to prioritise activities.

28. These weaknesses in the role of councillors are due to a number of factors. There is a lack of dedicated administrative support for elected members. None of the eight authorities, including Strathclyde which serves almost half of the

country, has any dedicated support staff. Basic administrative support is provided by a clerk to the board, but invariably this only represents a small part of their wider role in their council. As a result, elected members tend to rely heavily on senior officers to guide them. In some cases, members consult with local staff representatives, such as the Fire Brigades Union (FBU). They can provide an invaluable insight into operational concerns but, by definition, cannot provide fully independent advice on matters such as the location of fire stations, crewing levels, or shift patterns.

29. Councillors understandably feel the need to respond to concerns from local communities and, to some extent, staff. But there are examples where campaigns to preserve existing local services and staff terms and conditions have overwhelmed proposals to use resources more efficiently. Making changes to public services is never easy, especially when they are valued by local communities. However, the financial pressures facing the service are likely to lead to the need for significant service change in the longer term. So it is essential that the new Scottish Fire and Rescue Service can find ways of engaging effectively with communities and the workforce over service change.

30. Training for elected members is also mixed. Some services have a reasonably structured approach, carrying out training needs assessments. A number have introduced some form of specialisation to help members develop a degree of expertise in specific areas. In Central Scotland Fire and Rescue, for example, some members act as board 'champions' in areas such as community safety and health and safety, taking a lead in liaising with relevant staff. However, in most cases, members receive little training on fire and rescue issues.

31. Board members have a key role to play in holding fire and rescue services to account for their performance. They do this by scrutinising performance reports and challenging what the services have achieved and what resources they have used to do this. All Scottish fire and rescue services have appropriate governance structures to support effective scrutiny. This is usually through a specific subcommittee or forum focused on performance issues.

32. Services are also improving the quality of performance information they provide to elected members, although some have developed this much more effectively than others. The better services provide:

- a comprehensive range of performance information, based on both local and national indicators
- information clearly presented in support of strategic objectives
- performance stated against targets, using 'traffic-light' colours for easy reference
- trend information.

33. However, despite appropriate structures and improvements in performance information, we found that members' scrutiny of performance needs to be improved across all services. In general members tend to focus on operational aspects of performance, with little emphasis on its strategic impact. Where there are examples of strong and effective scrutiny, these tend to be isolated and provided by a small core of members.

34. Some services provide elected members with performance information broken down by council, or divisions, or both, so that members can draw comparisons. However, we found some common shortcomings. In particular, there is still some way

to go across Scotland when it comes to understanding cost data and measuring the spending and impact of prevention work. In addition, there is little use of benchmarking information, either within Scotland, with other UK services, or with other comparable public services, to demonstrate relative performance. This is important in allowing board members to gauge the extent to which services are improving and resources are being used well. There is also a lack of information provided to members relating service performance to the delivery of partnership outcomes and the achievement of Single Outcome Agreement (SOA) objectives.

35. There is significant room for improvement in member leadership. This is a long-standing issue that has not been resolved. Members are not always willing to make tough decisions in the face of public opposition. There can be exceptions, with councillors supporting decisions on station closures and mergers. They can also work corporately, resisting local constituency pressures in order to work for the benefit of the area as a whole. Members of the Lothian and Borders Joint Fire Board, for example, stood by their decision to introduce a day-shift system at Livingston, despite the offer of additional funding from the local council.

36. However, decisions of this kind are rare. Despite an increasing emphasis on preventative work and a steady fall in the numbers of fires and casualties, the numbers of stations, staff, and locations of stations has stayed broadly static for many years. Our audits found some examples of members unwilling to sanction a shift in resources despite compelling evidence. Balmossie in Tayside is an example of members unwilling to sanction a shift in resources, despite compelling evidence. Throughout the country, officers have at times anticipated the political difficulties in agreeing to changes and have tended to avoid putting proposals to members.

37. Our audits found very little effective challenge at fire authority committee meetings. This is not helped by the general lack of clarity of committee reports and papers. Members tend to lack the skills to scrutinise performance, financial or operational information. Better training on scrutiny is being provided but our audits found that those members who need it the most tend not to attend.

38. Providing adequate training and support for members of the national Scottish Fire and Rescue Service will be essential to enable them to set a clear direction for the new service and hold the chief officer to account effectively. Improving training and support for members at local authority level is also needed to improve their ability to contribute to the shaping of local fire and rescue plans and provide effective local oversight of fire and rescue performance.

Integrated Risk Management Planning

IRMPs provide a framework for securing Best Value. All services use them, but with varying degrees of effectiveness. IRMPs need to set out more clearly community risks and how they are being managed.

39. Since 2005, all fire and rescue services have been required to produce, and regularly update, IRMPs. These are a key aspect of business processes and the strategic deployment of resources. IRMPs are closely related to the concept of Best Value, and are about identifying community risks and service demand and seeking to ensure that these are used to prioritise the deployment and use of resources.

40. Risks which fire and rescue services need to manage are commonly considered under the following main groupings:

- **Prevention activity:** which includes activities such as community fire safety initiatives aimed at changing people's behaviour to help them stay safe.
- **Protection activity:** which involves protecting people from the risk of fire by providing advice to businesses about fire safety legislation and its enforcement.
- **Emergency response:** which includes the operational response of the fire and rescue service to incidents such as fires and road traffic collisions.

41. All fire and rescue services use risk modelling when developing their IRMPs. Software such as the Fire Services Emergency Cover (FSEC), which is in common use, provides a wealth of data on local demographics and community risk and can form the basis for objective decisions on how to deploy resources. However, FSEC has some weaknesses as it is based on census data and therefore only updated every decade. As a result, some services supplement FSEC with other software and more current performance and risk data.

42. There are examples where IRMP has helped to change services over the past decade. Examples include: the merger of stations at Rosyth and Dunfermline, in Fife, and at Parkhead and Cambuslang in Glasgow, the transfer of resources from Dyce to Altens, in Grampian, and the introduction of a day shift at Livingston.

43. However, in the face of more political or emotive arguments, fire and rescue authorities have faced significant challenges in changing how they provide services to better match community risks. There are many examples of potential changes which have not been implemented or, in anticipation of the political difficulties, have not even been proposed. For

example, relatively modest proposals to move from a full-time to a retained night shift at Balmossie Station in Tayside have led to strong resistance from staff representatives and some politicians. Similarly, the network of stations in the Highlands and Islands has been based on historic factors rather than an objective assessment of community risk. Other examples, on a smaller scale, can be found in most parts of the country. Proposals to reduce services in one area can easily provoke strong reactions from local communities, overwhelming arguments in favour of increasing resources in other areas.

44. It is noticeable that, over the past decade, at a time when the number of fires has steadily fallen, the number of fire stations has not changed significantly. Since 2004, the overall number of stations has fallen from 390 to 378 (a fall of three per cent), but this has been entirely in the number of volunteer stations. Over the same period, the number of full-time stations has increased from 76 to 78.

45. Few services can show if fire stations are located in the right place or resources are being used to best effect. There is also some inconsistency between different parts of the country, with some full-time stations having lower activity levels than retained stations elsewhere. Similarly, some volunteer stations have higher activity levels than some retained stations ([Exhibit 5, overleaf](#)). During our audits, few services could clearly explain how they balance their resources across prevention, protection and response activity. This can be particularly important in the more remote areas of Scotland where community safety is likely to benefit more from a focus on preventative work rather than an emergency response service.

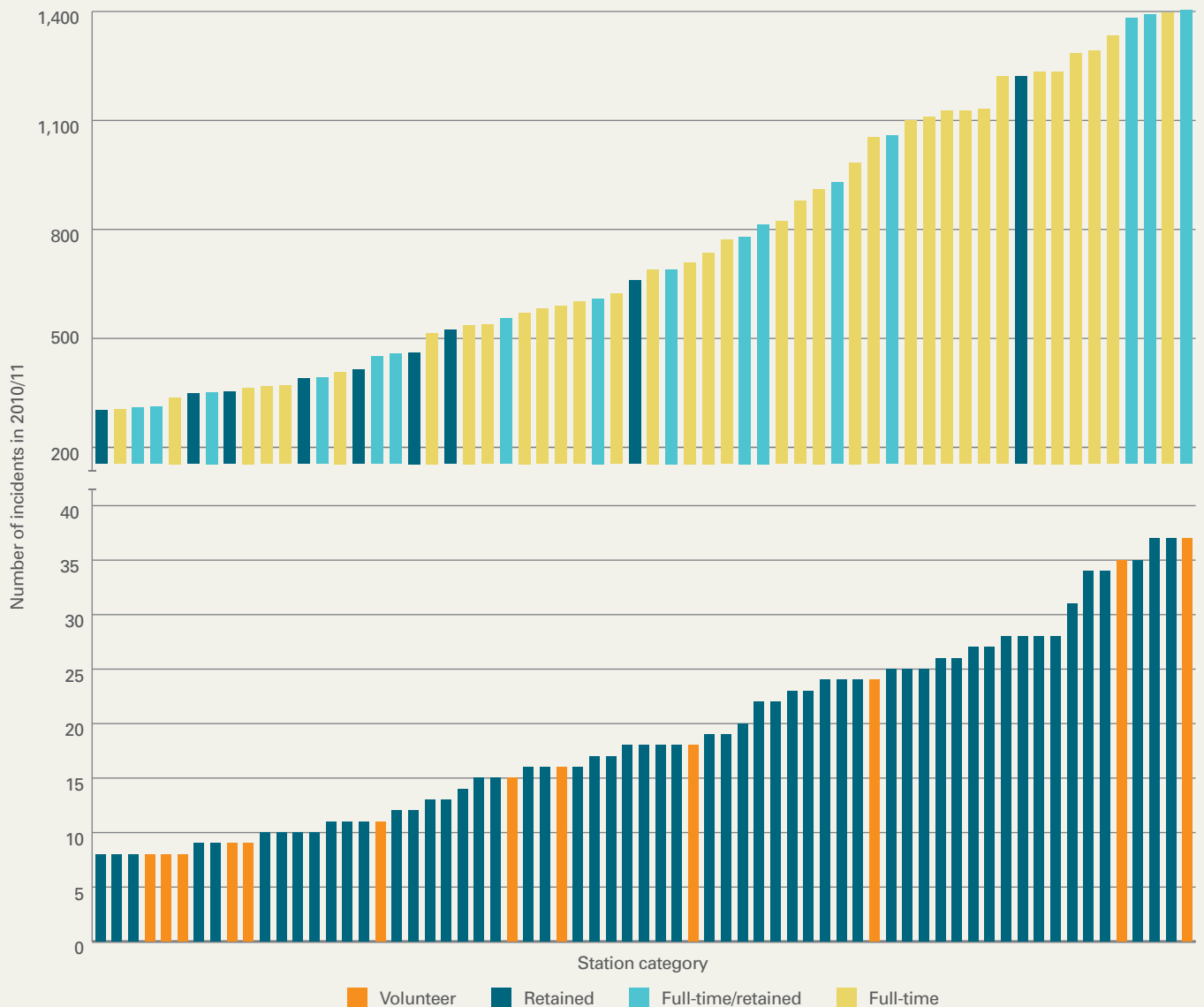
46. Our audits found a number of positive aspects of IRMPs but also significant room for improvement. Common features include:

- The quality and clarity of plans is variable. Most plans are not written in plain language.
- Background data and evidence is either not provided to the public or not referenced.
- The balance between prevention, protection and response activity is not clear.
- Spending decisions are not explained or linked to service priorities.
- The impact of preventative work in reducing community risk is not consistently reflected in subsequent versions of IRMPs.
- Other parts of business that are taking an increasing proportion of time, eg special incidents such as Road Traffic Collisions (RTCs) and flooding, are often not included.
- Plans are not well linked to the plans and ambitions of other emergency services or higher-level strategic plans.

Exhibit 5

Comparison of station utilisation rates

Some retained stations are more active than some full-time stations, and some volunteer stations are more active than some retained stations.



Source: Scottish Government Statistical Bulletin and CLG Fire Statistics Monitor

47. As a result, it makes it difficult to prioritise spending against risks, and it is not easy for members or the public to judge how well risks and resources are being managed. Therefore, Best Value is not yet being maximised from IRMP.

Community engagement

Community engagement is patchy; informal engagement is good and the service has a very positive public image; but formal engagement with communities about service priorities and important plans is limited.

48. Understanding what local people's priorities for their fire and rescue service are and communicating and engaging with communities about any proposed service changes are important aspects of Best Value, as is communicating openly and in a balanced way about local service performance. This issue is all the more important at a time of such significant change to the service as it moves from a local to a national service.

49. All fire and rescue services carry out some form of public consultation about important plans and they have a good idea about what the public want, although they tend to rely on professional judgement rather than hard data. Some services have carried out public satisfaction surveys, and most carry out surveys after incidents. These surveys show very high levels of satisfaction. In addition, the local media generally give a positive view of the fire and rescue service, although this varies if there is a newsworthy story about perceived inappropriate spending or poor decision-making. Services tend to receive more coverage if they are planning to change services that may not be popular with the public.

50. All fire and rescue services have engaged the public and partners in developing their IRMPs, but it is not clear what changed as a result.

51. Under Best Value, fire and rescue services have a duty for Public Performance Reporting (PPR). Most produce annual reports, summarising their work over the past year. However, these tend to focus on good news stories, highlighting activities and investments. While they can provide a summary of performance, they tend not to be balanced, with little focus on areas where targets have not been met or where significant improvements are needed.

52. Fire and rescue services' websites are variable. They all provide useful information online. Lothian and Borders have good information about accessing their fire stations. Tayside have all their station plans online. Strathclyde's website contains good information aimed at young people and specific minority groups. Grampian's website contains a lot of information, including fire board papers. Dumfries and Galloway has its own part of the council's website and has its response standards clearly displayed. Fife has its own website despite being a council service, and this contains some good information on community fire safety initiatives. However, it is not always easy to find out if services are delivering what they said they would do. In addition, websites are not used for consultation purposes other than placing documents on the website. As a result there have been missed opportunities for generating ongoing feedback on community safety initiatives, finding out what the public want, and giving safety messages by using social media.

Partnership working

Fire and rescue services work well with their partners to improve community safety. However, hard evidence is needed to assess the impact of community education projects and whether they make best use of firefighters' time and skills.

53. Partnership working is a real strength for fire and rescue services. At a strategic level, all actively contribute to their local community safety partnerships, using targets within their SOAs to help direct their work. At an operational level, all fire and rescue services have imaginative community safety projects; particularly for road safety, local events such as bonfire night, and youth education schemes.

54. Partnership working is particularly strong in the two unitary councils, Fife and Dumfries and Galloway (Case study 1). At a strategic level, both councils have joint police, fire and community safety committees, helping to encourage a joint approach to preventative work. At an operational level, there are strong working relationships between fire and rescue and other council services, such as social work, housing, education, and police. Information on vulnerable individuals can be more easily shared, helping to target preventative work.

Case study 1

Partnership working with a unitary council

Fife Council has a Community Safety Task Group, bringing together staff from fire and rescue, police, housing, and social services. This coordinates a range of activities which support the council's community safety objectives. Information is shared between services on vulnerable individuals, helping to target preventative work. The scope of home fire safety visits is often widened to include other risks such as electrical equipment and 'slips and trips'. Sprinklers, an important preventative measure, are now fitted in all new council houses.

Source: Audit Scotland

55. There are also examples elsewhere of the impact of fire and rescue services working in partnership with other local organisations. There has, for example, been a significant reduction in wilful secondary fires within the 'Gramps' area of Aberdeen. This was achieved by Grampian Fire and Rescue working closely with Grampian Police, countryside rangers and local schools, helping to share information on incidents and coordinate activities. Similarly, Tayside Fire and Rescue works with local voluntary organisations, helping them to carry out fire prevention work in hard-to-reach groups on its behalf. More recently, Strathclyde Fire and Rescue has helped establish a Community Safety Partnership Unit, bringing together staff seconded from a wide variety of public and voluntary organisations (Case study 2).

56. Progress has been made in recent years on data sharing with other local organisations. Sharing information can be vital in saving lives, helping to identify vulnerable individuals known to different organisations and to target preventative work. Increasingly, information is shared with fire and rescue by other local government services such as housing, social work, and police. However, many chief fire officers are frustrated at the lack of information shared by NHS organisations, who are worried that the sharing of information on individuals might contravene the requirements of the Data Protection Act.

57. Across Scotland, services take part in a wide range of community safety activities with partner organisations, from education and awareness-raising with schools and youth groups to diversion schemes designed to prevent fires. Lothian and Borders is particularly proactive in these projects (Case study 3), but all services work with partner organisations to help deliver road safety programmes or fire-prevention exercises.

Case study 2

Integrated partnership working

In 2010, Strathclyde Fire and Rescue helped establish a Community Safety Partnership Unit (CSPU). This covers all of Strathclyde and includes seconded staff from other public organisations, such as local councils and NHS boards, Glasgow Housing Association, Strathclyde Police, and Strathclyde Youth.

Having different organisations involved in developing policies, sharing intelligence, sharing risk assessments and safety checks, and holding case conferences has produced many benefits. It has helped lead to a 110 per cent increase in the number of home fire safety visits carried out in high-risk houses, and a threefold increase in fire safety enforcement work carried out in business premises. It has also helped target safety visits on vulnerable individuals, with referrals being made from other organisations to Strathclyde Fire and Rescue. Similarly, fire and rescue staff have also been seconded to agencies such as Strathclyde Police and Glasgow Housing Association to strengthen preventative work and improve operational intelligence sharing between organisations.

Source: Audit Scotland

Case study 3

Youth education work in Lothian and Borders

Cooldown Crew

Cooldown Crew is a programme aimed at 10–14-year-old schoolchildren with recognised difficulties. It consists of intensive one-week training on fire safety, first aid and other community-based skills. In 2010/11, 159 young people attended and 140 completed the course.

Evaluation of courses in West Lothian showed an immediate improvement in behaviour and school attendance of course participants. The improvement was still measurable 3–6 months following participation.

Phoenix Programme

This is an evening programme for youth diversion work, aimed at building on the Cutdown Crew, offering other young people the opportunity to work with the fire and rescue service one night a week.

There are three Phoenix Programmes: in Edinburgh, West Lothian and Midlothian. Each involves 15 participants, attending one evening a week and learning about self-discipline, fire safety and life skills. Attendance rates are high and feedback from parents is encouraging.

Fire Skills for Success

In 2008, Lothian and Borders introduced a new programme in Edinburgh, partly funded through the European Structural Fund. The programme is aimed at 16–25-year-olds and fulfils the Government's requirement for the fire and rescue service to do more work with young people to improve social inclusion and attainment.

The service delivers the programme in partnership with Careers Scotland, Capital City Partnership and The Prince's Trust, and students receive a nationally recognised BTEC qualification. In 2010/11, 12 courses were run with 101 participants.

Source: Lothian and Borders Fire and Rescue

58. Our audits found that these projects are highly regarded, both by fire and rescue services and by partner organisations. Some expressed concerns that, in a climate of recession affecting the public sector, there is a risk that such projects will not be regarded as core services by partners and have their budgets cut. There are strong feelings that these projects are an important part of preventative activity, with wider benefits for society. However, our audits found no robust assessments of the impact of these educational programmes. Without this, it is difficult to assess their impact and whether or not they represent the best use of time and effort.

Performance management

Performance management is improving and services are increasingly evaluating their own performance.

59. In 2007, Audit Scotland commented on the need for fire and rescue services to improve the use of performance information to manage their services. Since then, most services have improved the range and quality of information that they provide to senior officers and councillors.

60. The majority of fire and rescue services are developing a more performance-focused culture within their organisations, along with more effective approaches to reviewing their performance and business processes. Some services are effective in analysing and challenging their performance. In Grampian Fire and Rescue, for example, alternate corporate management team meetings focus on performance management. In Strathclyde Fire and Rescue, the corporate performance team holds senior managers to account for performance on a quarterly basis. Tayside Fire and Rescue manages performance on a more geographic basis, aligned to local authority boundaries to improve local accountability and to provide better links to SOAs.

61. However, each service has tended to develop or select its own performance measures, making it difficult to draw comparisons with others. There is a wealth of performance data available. Much of this is collated and reported nationally by the Scottish Government, the CFOAS, the Accounts Commission and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA). But there is little agreement between the services on what are the most useful measures. Some management teams and boards, for example, monitor the availability of retained stations and appliances, but some do not. Similarly, some monitor the monthly or quarterly activity levels of individual stations and crews, while others simply review annual data.

62. Significant effort was made to establish a national performance framework in 2009, but this was unsuccessful. Only in recent months has progress been made in agreeing an initial set of common measures. In recent years, a suite of performance indicators has been developed by CFOAS, but it tends to be used as a menu from which individual services pick and choose. Even where services use the same performance measures, there can be differences in definitions. We found, for example, differences in the definitions used for casualties, particularly those sent to hospital for precautionary checks. As a result, there is little use made of benchmarking performance, allowing services to compare their performance directly with others

63. In addition, services still tend to monitor activity levels, rather than the impact of these activities. The number of home fire safety visits, for example, is often reported. Some services have gone further and monitor the number of visits carried out on high-risk properties. Very little, however, is done to assess the impact of home fire safety visits in reducing the number of house fires. Similar points could be made about other activities, such as statutory fire audits or community

safety education programmes. This is a complex challenge, with many wider social factors affecting community safety. But services need to assess the impact of their work in order to help direct resources to where they are most effective.

64. Establishing a performance assessment framework which allows better comparisons to be made across Scotland against a common set of key performance measures, but which balances local performance concerns against national service priorities, will be an important task for the future Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

Continuous improvement and inspection

Most fire and rescue services carry out some form of self-assessment. But it needs to be embedded more consistently and used to drive improvements in service performance.

65. To help achieve continuous improvement in performance, nearly all fire and rescue services have carried out best value reviews and some form of self-evaluation, typically based around the Public Sector Improvement Framework (PSIF). For example:

- Fife Fire and Rescue has twice carried out a structured self-assessment, using Fife Council's Fife Excellence Model.
- Strathclyde Fire and Rescue is carrying out a second cycle of organisational self-assessment using its Strathclyde Improvement Model.
- Lothian and Borders Fire and Rescue has carried out two strategic PSIF self-assessments.
- Dumfries and Galloway Fire and Rescue has recently self-assessed its key management processes using the PSIF.

- Tayside Fire and Rescue is rolling out a systematic programme of PSIF self-assessments throughout the service.

66. The number of services evaluating their own performance is encouraging. However, we found variation in how self-assessment activity is targeted and prioritised. It is important that services are using the outputs of their activity to make identified improvements.

67. In addition to self-evaluation, Strathclyde Fire and Rescue is the only Scottish service to have used an independent peer review to help it improve its processes and performance. In 2010, it invited London Fire Brigade to carry out a comprehensive peer review and it has acted on the findings.

68. Alongside the progress in self-evaluation being made in services, members of the scrutiny committee in Grampian Fire and Rescue carried out a self-evaluation exercise in 2010 using the PSIF.

69. There have been some weaknesses in national inspection arrangements. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Advisory Unit (SFRAU) was set up in February 2008 to replace the Fire Service Inspectorate. This change was part of the Scottish Government reform of external scrutiny arrangements of public bodies, with SFRAU having a more reactive role undertaking enquiries into critical service failures and providing advice to ministers. However, with reduced service inspection, this has diluted SFRAU's ability to provide a strong independent oversight of fire and rescue services. The recent creation of the role of Chief Inspector of Fire and Rescue Authorities (CIFRA) now presents an opportunity to strengthen this aspect of external scrutiny.

Part 3. Use of resources



Costs and efficiencies

Nationally, costs have steadily decreased over the past five years. However, differences remain in the costs of individual services that are not readily explained by factors such as the rural nature of some areas or levels of deprivation. The costs of fire and rescue services in Scotland are high compared with other parts of the UK.

70. The cost of fire and rescue services is significantly higher in Scotland than in England and Wales. Scotland's eight fire and rescue services spend roughly 30 per cent more per head of population than in England and Wales. This is historic and is in line with the wider pattern of higher public sector spending per head of population in Scotland compared with other parts of the UK.

71. The higher costs of Scottish fire and rescue are also likely to have been influenced by different funding arrangements. In England, fire and rescue services were funded on operational activity and, as calls decreased, so was their funding. In contrast with England, increasing establishments in Scotland under grant-aided-expenditure (GAE) funding have attracted increased revenue grant. This 'incentive' to increase staffing no longer exists. However, while staffing establishments are being reduced, the gap with England and Wales continues.

72. Fire and rescue services face a complicated relationship between costs and activity. Over the last ten years, real-term spending increases of around ten per cent (Exhibit 6) have coincided with a reduction in the numbers of fires and other incidents. However, this does not take account of the fact that, over this period, the focus of fire and rescue services has shifted. There is now more focus on prevention. Their roles and

responsibilities have widened to cover specialist rescues, such as road traffic accidents, flooding and rope rescues. These reflect changes in public expectations, technological advances and, in particular, legislative changes. These changes present difficulties for fire and rescue services in prioritising expenditure and reducing costs.

73. Growth rates in fire and rescue expenditure peaked in 2005/06, coinciding with the introduction of the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005, which introduced a modernisation agenda and new duties. Since then, real-term costs per head of population have generally been declining. Most of these savings have been workforce related, through vacancy management and freezing recruitment, lower than expected pay settlements and a reduction in medical retirements.

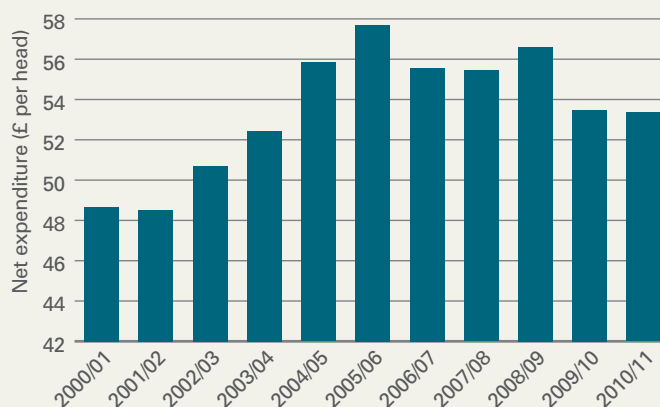
74. Within this overall picture, there are significant variations in costs between the eight Scottish services, ranging from £43 per head of population in Lothian and Borders to £75 in Highlands and Islands (Exhibit 7). Some of these variations might be explained by differences in geography. Inevitably, for example,

it is relatively expensive to provide an emergency service to remote communities in Highlands and Islands. Costs might also be expected to be higher in areas of deprivation, with greater demands on services. However, these factors do not provide a full explanation. It is not clear why the costs of Lothian and Borders, Central Scotland, or Grampian are relatively low, at least by Scottish standards. There is also no clear relationship between costs and outcomes. In some cases, higher costs may simply reflect higher funding levels, established many years earlier.

75. There is also a need to improve the quality of management accounting. All services can provide an analysis of how their money is spent, but there are significant variations in definitions and little consistency in the information they provide. It is, for example, difficult to establish reliable information on how much each service spends on preventative work. Without this basic information, it is difficult to assess the cost-benefits of different activities to inform the most cost-effective strategic deployment of resources.

Exhibit 6

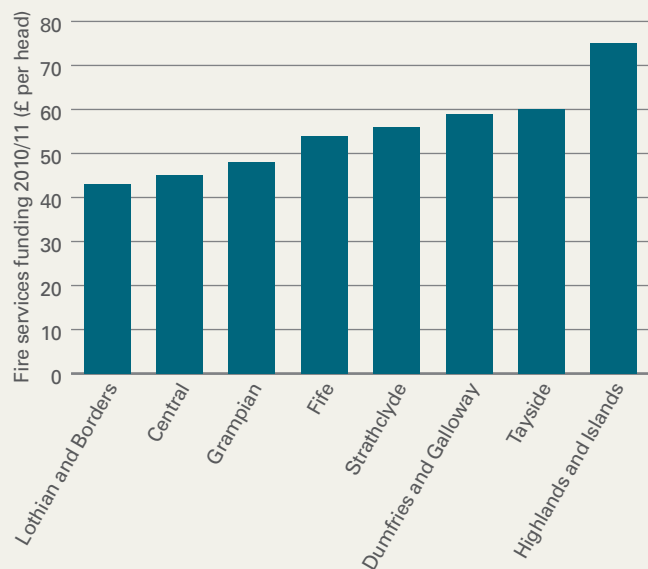
Real-term expenditure is now falling



Source: Audit Scotland (expenditure adjusted by HM Treasury deflator)

Exhibit 7

Costs per head vary significantly across services



Source: Scottish Government Statistical Bulletin

Financial management

Financial management is improving and is generally sound. But some local services face significant financial pressures and there is a need to improve management accounting and the prioritisation of capital projects.

76. Financial management is sound within each of the fire and rescue services. Audit reports for 2011/12 show steady improvement in areas such as budgeting and procurement. However, auditors have also highlighted the financial pressures that services are facing. Despite achieving significant efficiency savings in recent years, they are still faced with further budget reductions. The Scottish Government has indicated that, as part of the merger of services and the creation of a national fire and rescue service, it expects a further £293 million of savings to be achieved over the next 15 years.¹

77. However, there are significant differences in the current financial positions of the eight services and

the financial pressures that they face. Fife Fire and Rescue, for example, has faced intense pressures. While some additional funding has been found, it has been forced to reduce its numbers of firefighters. As part of a planned financial strategy, Grampian Fire and Rescue is using around £1 million of its reserves each year to help support its spending. Highlands and Islands has had to use £1.1 million of its reserves to help address serious weaknesses in firefighter training. Strathclyde Fire and Rescue has been able to increase its reserves in recent years to £11 million, but is now planning to use £2 million of these during 2012/13 to help offset budget reductions. Funding of the new national service will need to take into account the differing financial pressures being faced by services and the use of reserves to support budgets over the past two years.

78. There is a need to improve the prioritisation of capital projects. Individually, services have prioritised their local capital programmes. There has also been some coordination of

capital spending at a national level, with services pooling resources in order to avoid capital underspends. However, nationally, there is little in the way of prioritising projects. This is, perhaps, not surprising, given that services develop their own IRMPs and resource plans. As a result, however, there has been an ambitious programme to build new fire stations throughout the Highlands and Islands, while arguably there is a greater need in other parts of the country to maintain or replace buildings.

Shared services

Despite some exploratory work, there are few examples of shared services within fire and rescue, or with other emergency services.

79. At an operational level, fire and rescue services work well together. In major incidents, for example, resources are readily shared without question. Fire training facilities are also shared. However, there are no significant examples of shared support services, such as human resources, finance, or ICT. A number of feasibility studies have been carried out. For example, significant work was completed on the potential for shared human resources department between Fife, Tayside and Central Scotland fire and rescue services. However, this was never implemented. Progress has been made in some areas, such as procurement. Overall, however, there is significant scope for efficiency savings from more and better shared services in a national fire and rescue service.

80. There are also few examples of shared services or facilities with other emergency services. Some progress has been made in sharing vehicle maintenance workshops. At Ayr and Kilwinning, for example, police, ambulance, and fire and rescue services share facilities for servicing and repairing their vehicles. Most services can also point to examples where they share buildings with other public organisations. Greenock

community fire station, for example, is a shared facility between Strathclyde Fire and Rescue, Strathclyde Police and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. However, the scale on which assets are shared with other organisations across Scotland is very limited, particularly in rural areas.

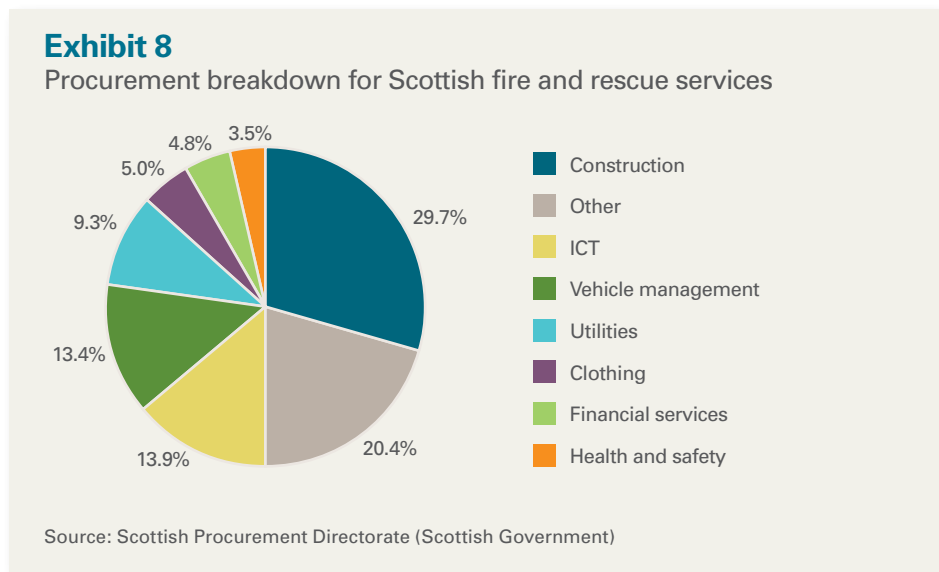
Procurement

Procurement processes have been improving, with greater collaboration across Scotland. There is scope to strengthen procurement within the planned national fire and rescue service to generate best value.

81. Sound arrangements for buying goods and services are important in securing best value. Fire and rescue services spent £56 million on goods and services in 2010/11, around 12 per cent of their overall expenditure. They spend about a third of this on capital projects and just over 13 per cent each on ICT and vehicle maintenance ([Exhibit 8](#)).

82. In earlier years, procurement has tended to be carried out by individual fire and rescue services, with little coordination between them. For example, the detailed specifications for Combined Aerial Rescue Platforms (CARPs), each costing around £1 million, have not been drawn up by services working at a national level. Some vehicles have been successfully established, while others have not. Similarly, services have made their own decisions about buying other equipment, such as breathing apparatus.

83. Since 2006, however, the eight services have collaborated much more successfully on buying goods and services. Tensions still exist between the benefits of national procurement and the need to maintain local flexibility. But, following the publication of the McClelland report, *Review of Public Procurement in Scotland 2006*, Scottish fire and rescue services have increased their collaboration and made much greater



use of pooled contracts. In 2006, FireScotland was set up. It has helped to:

- coordinate fire and rescue procurement
- standardise equipment
- better involve firefighters and research and development teams in determining the right equipment
- increase quality and service levels from a reduced number of suppliers.

84. Despite this, there is still scope for more progress. Fire and rescue services still use 106 construction contractors, and 145 suppliers for ICT services. Many of the policies and information on FireScotland's website are out of date and not been updated since 2006. Individual services can still go their own way on individual procurement decisions. For example, seven services have collaborated on buying personal protective equipment (PPE) but Strathclyde, by far the largest service, has continued to make its own arrangements.

85. At a local level, commissioning services remains underdeveloped. Some services commission voluntary agencies to help with home fire safety checks, although this is not universal across Scotland. Specialist expertise on procurement, occupational health,

law, project management and finance are not commissioned across Scotland. As a result some fire and rescue services have to rely heavily on their local council or offer wages that may not attract the best candidates. A new national fire and rescue service will operate these services on a greater scale. Therefore options for commissioning specialist support should be given greater consideration.

86. While fire and rescue services have improved how they buy goods and services in recent years, there is scope for the new national service to significantly improve on current procurement arrangements and practices to generate best value. The new service needs to better recognise the valuable role of procurement and invest in the right level of specialist skills and expertise. The service also needs to plan effectively for wider elements of procurement, such as:

- policy and strategy development
- the ability to carry out procurement capability assessments
- a more systematic approach to defining and monitoring procurement performance
- training and raising awareness among staff and key decision-makers.

Asset management and ICT

Fire and rescue services have significant existing expenditure commitments relating to assets and many ICT systems are in need of rationalisation

87. Scottish fire and rescue services estimate that, in addition to ICT, they manage assets worth over £550 million. This principally comprises:

- properties that include over 350 fire stations, headquarters buildings and other office accommodation, with a combined net book value of around £490 million
- a fleet of around 650 emergency response vehicles and other light vehicles, such as cars and boats, with a residual value of around £30 million
- personal protective equipment (PPE) for approximately 7,400 firefighters and worth about £15 million
- a range of other specialist equipment worth in excess of £10 million.

88. There is no reliable data available nationally to provide an indication of the value, utilisation, and condition of fire and rescue services' assets. There is also a variety of approaches in the way Scottish fire and rescue services manage their assets both strategically and operationally.

89. Not all services have appropriate asset management strategies and plans that provide good information on asset condition and suitability, investment and maintenance requirements, and governance arrangements for managing assets. Similarly, there is a spectrum across the services in the existence and effectiveness of asset management systems to inform budget-setting processes and manage assets effectively on a day-to-day basis. For

example, some services demonstrate relatively poor practice with no clear management system for tracing and identifying items of equipment, whereas others are demonstrating very good practice with highly developed systems, as shown in [Case study 4](#).

90. The new Scottish Fire and Rescue Service faces significant challenges in improving the strategic management and use of its assets to ensure these enable it to deliver services as effectively and efficiently as possible. To do this, it will need staff with appropriate expertise. It will also need a clear national strategy that reflects local needs and local delivery plans. In developing strategies that maximise how it uses assets, it should also draw on successful approaches across the UK and other countries where appropriate.

Buildings

91. Fire stations across Scotland range from some recent new buildings to those which are in an unsatisfactory condition. Several

services have a rolling programme of property condition surveys, typically over a five-year period, to make sure assets are fit for purpose and help set maintenance programmes. For example, Strathclyde Fire and Rescue has used surveys to tag every space within each property and attribute them with condition and suitability scores. This has allowed it to:

- reduce the cost of its property management service over the last two years
- better target maintenance and investment requirements
- reduce the value of its backlog maintenance from £12 million to £9 million during the last three years.

92. In general, fire and rescue estates are in good condition. However, based on its capital programme, Highlands and Islands Fire and Rescue has a backlog of around £17 million of capital work, with an estimated ten years before this could be completed.

Case study 4

Asset management in Tayside and Strathclyde fire and rescue services

Tayside Fire and Rescue has introduced an electronic asset management system that allows it to better manage the whole-life costs of assets and to streamline the operations of its Resource Centre. It estimates that its asset management system will deliver total savings of £48,000 over five years. The system has improved management information on Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) which is allowing a more efficient replacement strategy. For example, the system tracks requests for repairing, cleaning and replacing items of PPE along with details of regular testing. This allows it to extend the life of PPE through a tailored replacement strategy based on risk. The service is also using its asset management system to manage its operational equipment in the same way it manages its PPE. By risk rating all operational equipment it estimates that it can make substantial savings in its capital replacement programmes.

Strathclyde Fire and Rescue's property management system provides comprehensive management information. The service is developing links to financial systems to enable it to effectively monitor running costs and help it make decisions on spend-to-save initiatives and longer-term property options based on costs and risk.

Source: Audit Scotland

93. To date, Scottish fire and rescue services have not collaborated on property needs and use. They need to consider a different approach if they are to manage buildings more efficiently, get a more fit-for-purpose asset base, and reduce the backlogs on maintenance and construction programmes.

Fleet

94. The fleet of rescue appliances across fire and rescue services has been developing over time. Many have introduced rescue pumps which carry a more versatile range of equipment than standard fire appliances, particularly equipment to deal effectively with road traffic collisions (RTCs). Most have made efforts to introduce aerial rescue pumps (ARPs) that combine the benefits and flexibility of a standard fire rescue appliance with a high-reach capability. There has been varying degrees of success in introducing ARPs into emergency fleets, but where it has been successful, ARPs have delivered significant staffing efficiencies.

95. Fire and rescue services also have a range of specialist vehicles and equipment to help deal with terrorist incidents. These are placed in a range of strategic locations throughout the country. As part of its New Dimensions programme, the purchase of this equipment was funded by the Scottish Government. However, the cost of maintaining this equipment and training staff in its use is significant and has placed a significant drain on local resources. The future funding of these initiatives is currently being discussed as part of the wider reforms and merger of fire and rescue services.

96. Fleet maintenance has developed locally over many years, with no collaboration across services in maintaining vehicles and equipment maintenance. Despite this, services have rationalised their fleet maintenance depots. To generate greater efficiency, many have also collaborated with other emergency sector services on fleet maintenance.

Examples include Central Scotland Fire and Rescue, Lothian and Borders Fire and Rescue and Tayside Fire and Rescue. They provide vehicle maintenance for local police forces, and, in some cases, the Scottish Ambulance Service and other local organisations, such as the Coastguard.

97. The fire and rescue services in Fife and Dumfries and Galloway also generate efficiency by having the local councils provide services. Strathclyde Fire and Rescue has reduced its fleet maintenance operating costs through fleet maintenance partnerships with private sector organisations such as GlaxoSmithCline, Hunterston power station, and the Glasgow Training Group. There is scope for the new Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to examine a range of fleet maintenance options, including greater collaboration with other emergency services, as envisaged by the Tripartite Fleet Project of 2006.

98. While fleet maintenance is generally working well across Scotland, there are opportunities to plan maintenance better by maximising the technology used and to improve communication about maintenance schedules with station and crew managers. The new Scottish Fire and Rescue Service offers an opportunity to develop greater efficiency in fleet maintenance through more standardised working practices and by rationalising current operations. It also offers significant scope for rationalising fleet and other equipment, particularly in the number of spare or backup appliances and equipment that is held across the country.

Information and Communications Technology (ICT)

99. ICT underpins all aspects of front-line and back office services. It is essential for the operation of control rooms and communication between fire crews. It is also:

- becoming an increasingly important tool in tracking the availability of retained firefighters

- providing staff training and development, particularly in rural areas
- providing fire crews with important data on board fire appliances
- providing information for effective performance management.

100. In 2010/11, Scottish fire and rescue services spent around £7.5 million on buying ICT goods and services, a higher proportion of spending compared to other public bodies. This has brought many benefits, such as the provision of electronic information to fire crews on the layout of specific buildings and guidance on operational procedures. Funding from the Scottish Government has also led to the successful introduction of the Firelink radio system which allows services to communicate across service boundaries and with other emergency services.

101. Some services have developed clear ICT strategies and made significant investments which have helped deliver significant benefits. For example, Strathclyde Fire and Rescue has developed a 'data warehouse'. This allows it to more effectively capture and analyse performance-related data. Similarly, Tayside Fire and Rescue has a strategic partnering arrangement with Microsoft and uses ICT very effectively to deliver business benefits, such as including using video-conferencing facilities through all PCs to reduce travelling time.

102. Despite this, ICT has been relatively underdeveloped in some parts of the country. This has been particularly evident in remote areas of the Highlands and Islands, although progress has been made in recent months in tackling the issue. Here, broadband connections have proved to be unreliable in delivering firefighter training, recording and reporting information, and delivering emails.

103. This uneven development of ICT is largely due to the lack of collaboration between the eight Scottish fire and rescue services. They use various systems for areas such as control rooms and monitoring the availability of retained firefighters (Exhibit 9). In addition, as part of a unitary council, many of the systems used by the Fife and Dumfries and Galloway services are integrated with other council services rather than other fire and rescue services. Even where services are using common systems, there has been no collaborative approach to buying, using or maintaining these systems. For example, over half the services use the Gartan system to monitor the availability of retained firefighters, but services use it in different ways and for different purposes.

104. This lack of coordination in previous years has made it more difficult for services to achieve Best Value in procurement. In addition, the wide range of ICT systems and the lack of interconnection between services presents a significant challenge for the

new national fire and rescue service. In the short term, fire and rescue services have delayed renewing contracts and are extending the lifecycle of computers and other equipment. However, the myriad of arrangements and contracts will take time and considerable effort to rationalise.

Sustainability

Fire and rescue services understand what they need to do to reduce energy use and to make better use of natural resources and are steadily making their work more environmentally sustainable.

105. In dealing with the long-term challenges of climate change, the Scottish Government has set ambitious targets to reduce Scotland's greenhouse gases by 42 per cent by 2020 and 80 per cent by 2050. The Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 places duties on all public bodies to act in ways designed to reduce carbon emissions, promote climate change adaptation, and act sustainably.

106. Scottish fire and rescue services have made a good start in responding to this challenge. CFOAS has established an environmental working group to help coordinate the work of each fire and rescue service. Since 2010, it has worked with the Carbon Trust to review current performance and has also established guidance material, such as an *Environmental Champion Handbook*, to help services develop their approach to environmental sustainability. That group has helped establish a structured approach to improving environmental sustainability.

107. Each service now has a local Carbon Management Plan, with measurable targets aimed at reducing CO₂ emissions over the next five years. Each organisation has set local targets to reflect their current context and performance. For example, Dumfries and Galloway Fire and Rescue aims to reduce its CO₂ emissions by 20 per cent over five years to January 2016. All services have also made some progress in introducing more fuel efficient

Exhibit 9

Differences in ICT systems will make integration harder

	Retained firefighter availability	Command and control	Incident command and control systems
Central Scotland	Gartan	Remsdaq Resque NX	Capita/Sungard DS 2000
Dumfries and Galloway	In-house system	Fortek Fires CMS 7	Capita/Sungard DS 2000
Fife	In-house system	Fortek Vision	Capita/Sungard DS 2000
Grampian	Gartan	Fortek Vision Integrated Command and Control and ICCS	
Highlands and Islands	Gartan	Fortek Fires CMS 7	Capita/Sungard DS 2000
Lothian and Borders	Gartan	Fortek Fires CMS 7	Northgate ICCS
Strathclyde	Gartan	Motorola Procad 2.4.2	Capita/Sungard DS 2000
Tayside	RAPPEL	Fortek Vision Integrated Command and Control and ICCS	

Source: *FiReControl, Learning the lessons*, Scottish Government, 2011 and Audit Scotland

vehicles. However, the working group has identified many other examples of good practice which could be extended throughout the country (Case study 5).

108. While they have made good progress, fire and rescue services are still at an early stage in assessing the impact of this approach to sustainability. The new national fire and rescue service will need to maintain this momentum by monitoring progress against targets and finding ways to make further improvements.

Case study 5

Examples of improving sustainability

Grampian Fire and Rescue's new fire station at Anderson Drive in Aberdeen uses ground source heating, rainwater harvesting, high levels of insulation, a ventilation system which reclaims 80 per cent of the heat in the extracted air before it leaves the building, and self-closing doors to reduce drafts.

In a strategic partnership with Microsoft, Tayside Fire and Rescue has adopted video-conferencing facilities through all of its PCs. An average of 63 meetings a week now take place online. This has saved significant staff time, as well as reducing travelling requirements by around 1,200 miles per week, reducing CO₂ emissions by around 16 tonnes a year and saving around £12,000.

Source: Audit Scotland

Part 4. Workforce management



Key messages

- There is a need to develop a more coordinated and strategic approach to workforce planning for fire and rescue services in Scotland. There are currently significant unexplained variations in the balance of full-time, retained and volunteer firefighters, and in crewing levels and shift patterns across the service. Retained firefighters provide an essential and cost-effective service, but there are significant difficulties in recruiting enough and there is a need to review their terms and conditions.

How services manage their workforce

There is a need for a more strategic assessment to help determine the appropriate numbers of full-time, retained and volunteer firefighters.

109. Staff costs are the largest single element of fire and rescue spending. Services employ human resources (HR) specialists and most have an HR strategy. Services are also trying to develop much more flexible working arrangements although this is proving difficult in a uniformed service that carries out national bargaining for pay and conditions. Flexi-duty systems and working from home are in place for most fire and rescue services, and in some areas non-operational staff can work in job-share and part-time schemes.

110. All services have some form of workforce planning but, with the need to achieve budget reductions, these tend to focus on short-term considerations. Overall, there has been little change in staffing numbers over the past decade ([Exhibit 10](#)). The most significant change has been a fall in the number of retained firefighters, but this reduction is due to recruitment difficulties rather than any strategic plan as retained firefighters represent a very cost-effective resource to the service.

111. Productivity in fire and rescue services is unclear and difficult to judge. With a declining number of incidents and largely unchanged numbers of firefighters, stations and appliances, it might be argued that fire and rescue service productivity is declining. However, productivity cannot be measured solely in terms of the number of incidents attended or demand, as one of the service's aims is to reduce the level of such incidents.

112. There is a need to establish a more coordinated and strategic approach to workforce planning to address the significant differences in the workforce management approaches across the eight services. These include:

- **Managerial roles and responsibilities:** There are significant variations in how middle and senior managers supervise stations. In some services area commanders manage a small group of stations through to group managers supervising geographical areas.
- **Support given to community safety work:** All services get their firefighters to carry out home fire

safety checks but some, such as Strathclyde and Highlands and Islands, also have dedicated staff to do this.

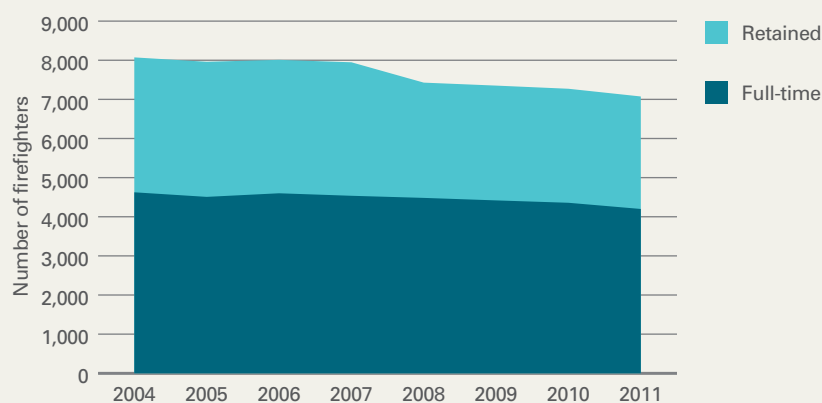
- **Workforce profile:** Significant variations between the eight services in the proportions of full-time, retained and volunteer firefighters that they employ ([Exhibit 11](#)).

113. In some cases, these differences reflect the context in which local services operate. It is not surprising that in rural areas, such as Highlands and Islands and Dumfries and Galloway, there is a much higher proportion of retained firefighters. However, there are other variations which are not so easily understood. Fife Fire and Rescue, for example, employs a higher proportion of full-time firefighters than other services. Similarly, there are differences in how services deploy retained and volunteer firefighters. In 2003, Highlands and Islands replaced most of its volunteers with retained firefighters, whereas Strathclyde Fire and Rescue continues to rely more strongly on volunteers in remote communities.

Exhibit 10

Change in the number of firefighters: 2004–11

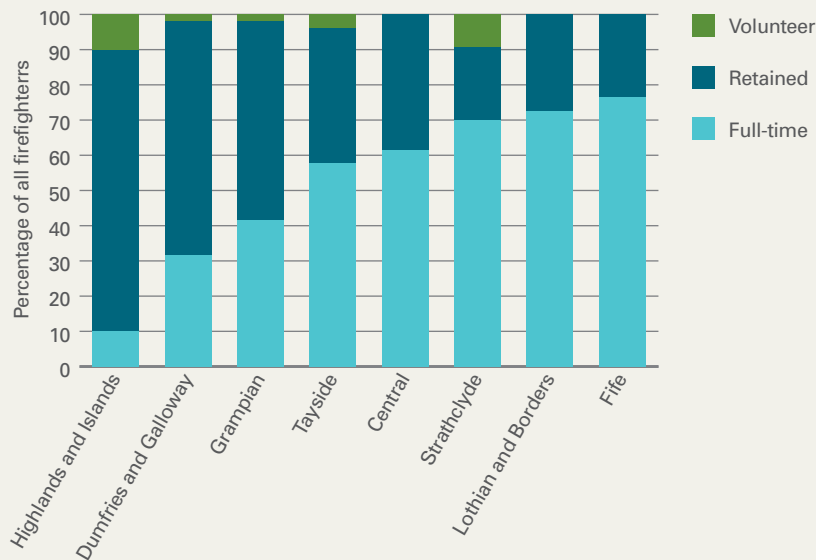
The number of firefighters has fallen since 2004, although much of this reflects the difficulties recruiting retained firefighters.



Source: Audit Scotland

Exhibit 11

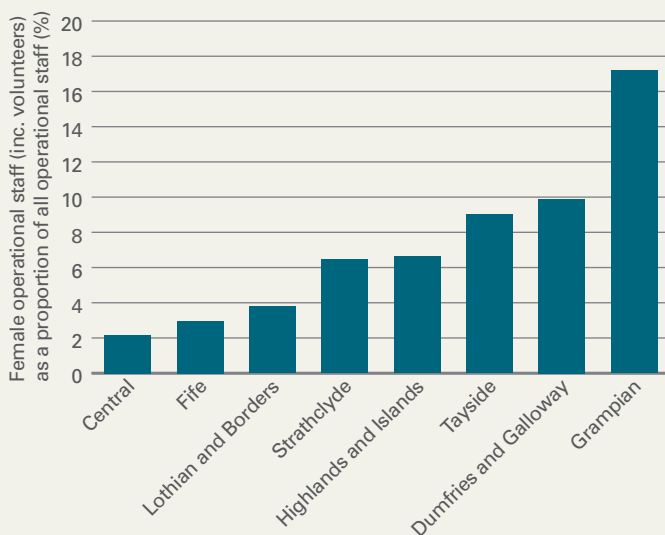
Proportion of all firefighters (headcount), 2010/11



Source: Scottish Government Statistical Bulletin

Exhibit 12

There is a marked variation in the numbers of women employed by the eight fire and rescue services



Source: Scottish Government Statistical Bulletin

Towards a more diverse workforce

Fire and rescue services need a more diverse workforce

114. Fire and rescue services need to be more representative of the diverse communities that they serve. Only then can they fully understand and identify with risks in local neighbourhoods.

115. However, there has been relatively slow progress since our last national report in 2006. For example, in March 2011, only 4.6 per cent of operational firefighters were women. This compares with 46 per cent of police officers, 42 per cent of ambulance staff, and 26 per cent of prison wardens.

116. There are similarly low numbers of disabled staff. In 2010/11, only 0.7 per cent of staff in fire and rescue services declared they had a disability. The police service employs 3.7 per cent, and the prison service employs 5.3 per cent.

117. Within this overall picture, however, there are signs of improvement. Some services, such as Grampian Fire and Rescue, now have a relatively high proportion of female firefighters (Exhibit 12). In addition, while firefighter crews remain overwhelmingly white and male, our audits found evidence of an increasingly open and welcoming culture. There is some evidence that this is having an impact on encouraging a more diverse workforce but, with current restrictions on staffing budgets and recruitment, there has been limited progress in recent years.

Shift systems

118. Shift systems for full-time firefighters remain largely unchanged over the last ten years. The most common shift system is the 2-2-4 system, commonly known as the 'four watch system', where firefighters work two days, two nights, and have four days off. This can be inefficient. Under

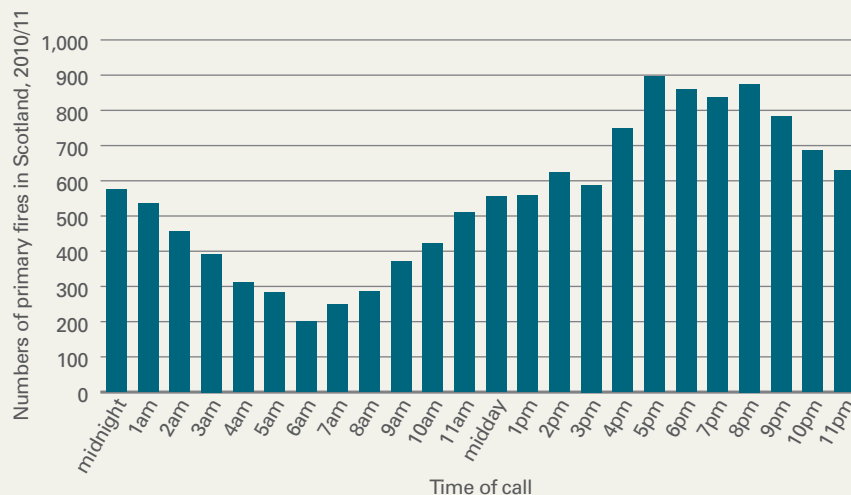
most crewing models, fire and rescue services have the same number of full-time firefighters on duty throughout a 24-hour period. However, there is a significant variation in the pattern of demand for emergency services, with fewer calls overnight and in the morning, and more in the evening (Exhibit 13). Firefighters not responding to calls can carry out training and preventative work. There is also a need to provide a certain level of emergency cover at all times. Fundamentally, however, the 'four watch system' produces a mismatch, where the number of firefighters can substantially exceed the likely call on them.

119. To help reduce these inefficiencies, some services have introduced new shift systems. At present, these are limited to a handful of stations. Changes in existing levels of fire cover can raise concerns from staff representatives and local communities, and need careful consultation and planning. But alternate shift systems can help concentrate staffing resources during the hours of peak demand, with more limited cover at other times. Day shifts, for example, are now used in one full-time and three retained stations within Lothian and Borders (Case study 6). They provide additional capacity during the day for both response and preventative work. They also help strengthen the emergency response for rural stations, providing a full-time presence during the day and helping to develop the skills of retained colleagues.

120. Strathclyde Fire and Rescue has taken a different approach and replaced its 'four watch system' with a 'five group duty system' (5GDS). This system of annualised hours brings more flexibilities in staffing arrangements, allowing a better match between staff availability and operational demand. Strathclyde estimates that this has led to significant staffing efficiencies, with the annual savings for a multi-pump station on 5GDS being around £187,000 or around six firefighters.

Exhibit 13

Demand over a 24-hour period



Source: Scottish Government Statistical Bulletin

Case study 6

Day shift duty system

The day shift duty system (DSDS) was introduced within Lothian and Borders Fire and Rescue in 2008. DSDS staff are full-time staff who work during the day only, Monday to Friday. They provide cover for emergency response and community safety activities. They can provide a cost-effective solution in some rural areas, where there are significant community risks or where it is difficult to recruit retained firefighters.

In Lothian and Borders, they are located in areas where there are significant risks of house fires and related casualties. They are based at Penicuik, Whitburn and Duns, formerly retained stations, which now have a full-time crew during the day, Monday to Friday and a retained crew at weekends and night. DSDS firefighters are also based at Livingston alongside a full-time primary appliance at the station. The DSDS firefighters crew the second pump during the day, Monday to Friday and a retained crew at weekends and nights. For the specific stations and also for adjacent retained stations, these DSDS firefighters are an important resource. They are also able to provide some support in terms of training and mentoring for retained firefighters in neighbouring stations.

It is, however, challenging for the service to maintain this arrangement. Full-time firefighters rarely request to transfer to the DSDS. The service has maintained the required establishment of DSDS firefighters through placement of staff transferring from other services and offering DSDS contracts to officers being re-employed following retirement. Neither of these approaches is sustainable. The other approach used has been to place trainees in vacancies at DSDS. Again this has limitations, with reduced trainee recruitment in recent years and the need to limit these placements to a maximum period of six months.

Source: Audit Scotland

In total, it has calculated that 5GDS has generated around £1.4 million in annual savings.

121. The success of these models of shift patterns suggests that there is scope to consider extending them to other parts of the country. Strathclyde's 5GDS is not suited to rural areas, where the retained system is more appropriate. But there is no clear reason why it could not be extended to urban areas throughout Scotland, helping to generate further savings and bringing greater flexibility in the use of the workforce. Similarly, using day shifts, combined with retained cover at night, has the potential to help concentrate crewing at times of greatest need and help develop the skills and training of retained firefighters.

Crewing levels

122. In addition to differences in shift patterns within the eight services, there are also some variations in crewing levels. Most services aim to crew their full-time appliances at 'five and four', with the first fire engine having five firefighters and the second having four. This is based on many years of experience of the number of firefighters needed to manage a significant incident. However, reduced crewing levels of 'four and four' is generally accepted in rural areas, partly due to difficulties in recruiting enough retained firefighters, and partly due to the lower frequency of serious incidents requiring nine firefighters.

123. However, even for full-time firefighters, 'five and four' crewing is not universal within Scottish fire and rescue services. Uniquely within the UK, Strathclyde aims to crew at 'five and five', arguing that an additional firefighter brings greater benefits in operational flexibility and firefighter safety. In contrast, because of financial pressures, Fife Fire and Rescue has been forced to crew at 'four and four' around 40 per cent of the time. Despite being out of

step with every other fire and rescue service, Fife Council considers that this has not led to any significant increase in community risk.

124. With wide variations in geography and population, there are clearly reasons for some variations in crewing levels. Few, for example, question the lower crewing of 'four and four' in retained stations. However, there are no clear reasons for the variations in full-time crewing, other than historic factors or what services are able to fund. There is a need for a new national fire and rescue service to review crewing levels, seeking objective evidence to support any variations rather than simply continuing with current levels.

Sickness absence

125. Sickness absence in fire and rescue services is costing people in Scotland approximately £2.3 million a year.² Over 29,580 days were lost to sickness in Scotland in 2010/11. Within this overall picture, there are big variations between the eight services (Exhibit 14).

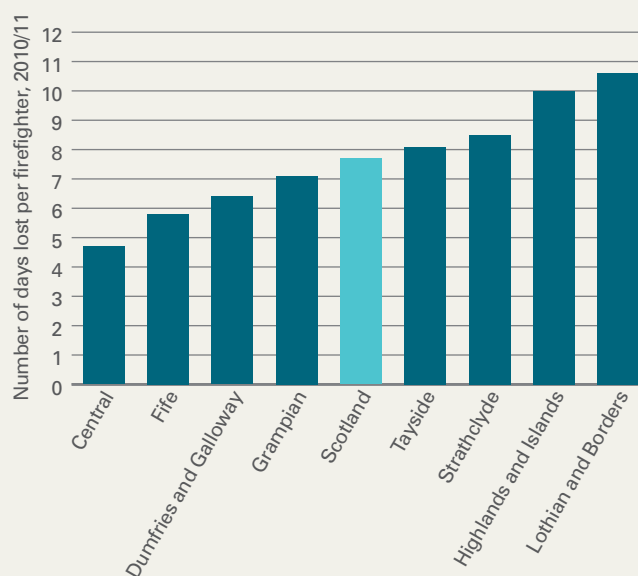
126. Occupational health services are used throughout the country to help reduce sickness absence and improve the well-being of firefighters. Back-to-work programmes, help and advice for staff with drug and alcohol problems, healthy eating, and physical fitness programmes are provided. However, access to these programmes in more remote areas and by retained staff is proving a challenge. Senior managers understand they have more to do to recognise when staff need support, and make sure that local managers can deal with issues rather than referring problems to others.

Training and health and safety

127. Training and health and safety are particularly important issues for fire and rescue services. Without maintaining key skills, firefighters can be exposed to serious health and safety risks. This can be particularly important in the more rural stations, typically staffed by retained or volunteer firefighters, where activity levels are low and the opportunities for practical experience are limited.

Exhibit 14

Sickness absence rates for firefighters



Source: Audit Scotland Statutory Performance Indicators (SPIs)

128. Fire and rescue services spent £8.24 million in total on training and development in 2009/10 and spend more on average than the rest of the UK. Strathclyde Fire and Rescue has also recently invested heavily in a new training centre.

129. A wide variety of training is available to fire and rescue services. Learning and development within Scotland is provided by the Scottish Fire Services College and the eight separate training and development facilities funded by each fire and rescue service. All have their own training programmes, management and governance arrangements.

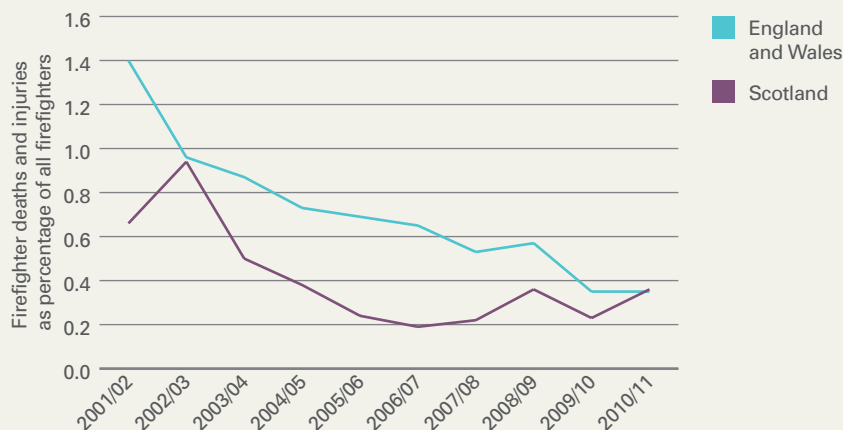
130. The national firefighter development programme contains 50 modules covering the subjects the firefighter must complete to maintain competence. They are led by the watch manager during training periods or used by individuals on the watch as e-learning modules. There are recordable assessments at the end of each of the modules. The content and outcomes of the modules correspond to national standards.

131. Training is well regarded by firefighters but they want to see more practical training. This is especially important in areas with low numbers of incidents where firefighters struggle to gain practical experience. Services have made progress in introducing new facilities for practical 'hot fire' training, such as Grampian Fire and Rescue's fire behaviour training unit which is used to train instructors for other services. Similarly, Highlands and Islands has established practical training facilities at strategic locations.

132. All fire and rescue services use annual staff performance appraisals to help assess training needs. In most services, however, these have still to be extended to retained firefighters where, arguably, the need is greatest. Similarly, apart from Strathclyde Fire and Rescue and the two unitary services in Fife and Dumfries and

Exhibit 15

Firefighter deaths and injuries as percentage of all firefighters



Source: Scottish Government Statistical Bulletin, CLG and Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) Statistics

Galloway, staff appraisals need to be extended to chief fire officers and other senior managers.

133. There is evidence to show that this emphasis in training and health and safety has had a positive impact in driving down the number of firefighter injuries (Exhibit 15)

134. However, our audits found some room for improvement with training and development:

- There are still some challenges in delivering the training and development for retained firefighters, and formal learning and development programmes do not necessarily suit their working lives.
- Training and development opportunities for non-operational staff are patchy and not as formalised as for firefighters, even though they can contribute significantly to operational services.
- Reporting arrangements for training vary and it is not always easy to see how many firefighters are being trained, the impact of their training, and if enough of the right type of training is being provided.

135. Fire and rescue services assess the continuing competence of firefighters using national guidance and standards. Some services, such as Strathclyde and Grampian have introduced a 'Ticket to Ride' policy which means that individuals, and even stations, can be temporarily taken 'offline' until deficiencies in training or processes are resolved. Others, such as Highlands and Islands, are still in the process of establishing robust arrangements to help ensure that firefighter training and skills are properly maintained.

136. Fire and rescue services are improving their focus on health and safety. Safety policies, training, and equipment have all been reviewed in the light of recent Health and Safety Executive guidance. As a result the reporting of accidents and near misses is improving.

Retained firefighters

Retained firefighters are vital and cost-effective, particularly in rural areas. However, services have concerns about how to maintain a service that relies heavily on retained firefighters.

137. Retained firefighters make a significant contribution to public safety. There are around 3,000 employed in Scotland, based in around 80 per cent of fire stations and representing over 40 per cent of frontline staff.

138. As an on-call service, retained firefighters represent good value for money. They are paid an annual retainer plus an attendance fee for every call-out. The CFOAS has estimated that retained firefighters cost on average £9,000 a year to employ compared to £42,000 for a full-time member of staff. The Bain review³ recommended increasing the use of retained firefighters as they are an efficient way of providing firefighters where demand is not high. Reviews of part-time and volunteer firefighter services across the world, such as in the USA and New Zealand, come to similar conclusions.^{4,5}

139. However, there are significant problems across the country in recruiting retained firefighters. Communities are changing and people are increasingly becoming more mobile and working during the day in other parts of the country. A lack of flexibility in employment conditions makes it difficult to recruit retained staff to cover for some times of the day or on weekdays. We found that services were often unable to provide full crews on some appliances, resulting in the vehicle being unavailable.

140. We met many senior officers who think it is time to rethink the current approach to retained firefighters. Tayside Fire and Rescue have started to consider alternative remuneration packages, such as those introduced in Wales. Similarly, reviews in areas such as Dorset, East Sussex, Cumbria, and Shropshire have all concluded that retained firefighters need dedicated full-time staff to support their training and administration.

141. There are also challenges in maintaining retained firefighter skills. Typically, they operate in rural areas with relatively low levels of activity. Without the opportunities for regular practical experience, they need particular support in maintaining their skills and training. This has been an issue in Highlands and Islands, where concerns about the training of retained firefighters have had to be urgently addressed.

142. Services deploy retained firefighters in different ways. In some areas such as Dumfries and Galloway, they are expected to do all that a full-time firefighter would. In others such as Fife their role is restricted because their training and experience can be limited. This can help focus training on local risk factors. For example, retained firefighters are usually trained to deal with road traffic collisions but may not be trained to rescue people from rivers or use equipment like ropes or breathing apparatus where this is not considered to be relevant to local risks.

143. The number of retained firefighters needed to crew appliances also varies. When responding to incidents, full-time crews generally do not turn out with less than a crew of five and have plenty of back-up available. In the more rural areas, it is accepted that retained firefighters

usually turn out with a crew of four. This raises public expectations of retained staff and puts pressure on the crew to carry out an activity regardless of their own safety.

144. Some services seek to support their retained firefighters by having full-time firefighters work alongside them. In Lothian and Borders, for example, the introduction of a day shift system in some rural stations means that full-time firefighters can be available to help other local retained stations. In Strathclyde Fire and Rescue, a small number of full-time firefighters are based overnight in strategic rural locations, ready to strengthen the local retained emergency service.

3 *Independent Review of the Fire Service*, Professor Sir George Bain, 2002.

4 *Comprehensive Review of Fire and Rescue Services*, Frederick County Maryland, USA, November 2007.

5 *Describing the value of the contribution from the volunteer fire brigade*, New Zealand Fire Service, December 2009.

Part 5. Service performance



Key messages

- Fire and rescue services have made an important contribution to a steady reduction in the numbers of fires and casualties over the past decade, although these remain above levels in other parts of the UK. There is a strong emphasis on preventative work, such as home fire safety visits, which is increasingly targeting areas of greatest risk. However, there is no consensus on what level of preventative work is appropriate.

Number of fires and casualties

There has been a steady fall in the number of fires and casualties, although the reduction is not as great as in other parts of the UK.

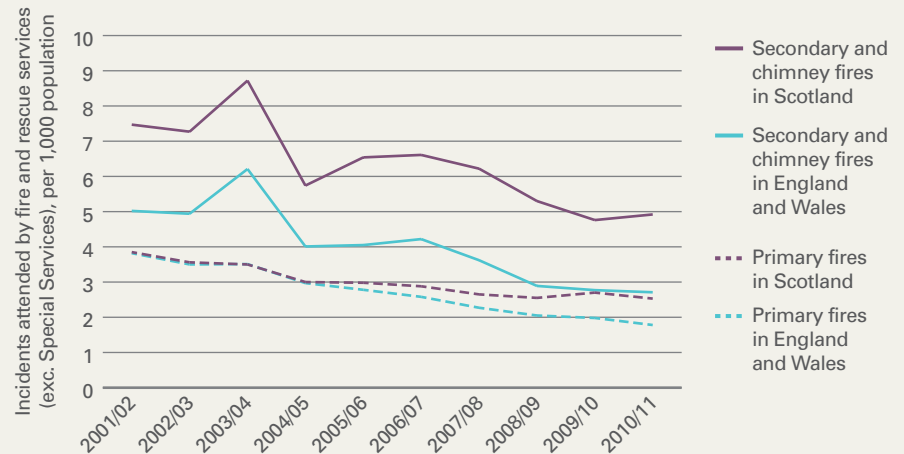
145. Over the last decade, the number of fires in Scotland has fallen steadily. Our audits found this steady decline throughout the country. The number of primary fires, which involve some life risk or significant financial loss, has fallen by around a third over the past decade. Similarly, the number of secondary fires, which do not involve risk to life and have no real financial loss, is also down by around 29 per cent.

146. Through an increasing emphasis on prevention, fire and rescue services have made an important contribution to these falls. However, a number of other factors have influenced this fall, including wider social changes, such as a decrease in the number of people smoking, and improvements in housing and furniture regulations. The number of secondary fires, which includes grassland fires, can also be influenced by weather conditions. The spike in 2003/4, for example, coincided with an unusually dry summer.

147. While fire and rescue services should take credit for the fall in the number of fires, the rate of decline has been slower than in England and Wales ([Exhibit 16](#)). In 2001/02, Scotland recorded 3.8 primary fires

Exhibit 16

Long-term trend of falling number of fires



Source: Scottish Government Statistical Bulletin and CLG Fire Statistics Monitor

for every 1,000 people, in line with the UK average. By 2008/09, primary fires in Scotland had fallen by a third to 2.5 for every 1,000 people. Over the same period, however, the number of primary fires in England and Wales had almost halved to 1.8 for every 1,000 people. The pattern for secondary fires is similar, with the Scottish decrease noticeably slower than in England and Wales. There is some evidence to suggest that this could be due to Scottish services spending less on preventative work. Since 2004, English services have received additional funding, specifically aimed at helping them meet targets to reduce the number of house fires and casualties.

148. There has also been real success in reducing the number of accidental house fires, where the vast number of deaths and injuries occur. Over the past decade these have fallen by around a quarter, with deaths and injuries falling by a third. This is a significant achievement. But the number of house fires in Scotland is still broadly double the level in England and Wales. In 2010/11, there were 1.0 accidental house fires for every 1,000 people in Scotland, compared with 0.6 in England and Wales. Similarly, there were 7.3

accidental house fire deaths for every million people in Scotland, compared to 4.2 in England and Wales.

Prevention

There are significant differences in the way services carry out their preventative work. Little has been done to evaluate the impact of this work and to find out which approaches provide best value.

149. Traditionally, fire and rescue has been seen as an emergency response service. However, the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005 also gave fire and rescue authorities statutory responsibilities for carrying out preventative work. This community safety role is particularly important in Scotland which has for many years had a higher level of fires and casualties than in other parts of the UK.

150. In response to this high level of incidents the *Scotland Together* report was published in 2010. This was based on research commissioned by the Scottish Government and led by the chief fire officer from Strathclyde Fire and Rescue. It made 37 recommendations aimed at improving the prevention of fires throughout Scotland. These include

services improving how they monitor incidents and share information with other public bodies. They also include longer-term measures, such as encouraging property owners to install sprinklers and supporting the introduction of Reduced Ignition Propensity Cigarettes, which do not continue to burn if left unattended.

151. Despite the progress made in implementing these recommendations, there is currently no standard framework within Scotland for carrying out preventative work. All services use a core of common approaches, such as home fire safety visits, statutory fire audits of business and commercial premises, and community education programmes. They also all recognise that they need to work in partnership with other public organisations. However, each service places a different emphasis on each of these core elements and targets this work in different ways.

152. Services have also done relatively little work to evaluate the impact of their preventative work. They can point to long-term falls in the number of fires and casualties. But these are part of a national trend which is likely to be influenced by other factors such as a decline in the number of people smoking, improvements in housing stock, and fire-retardant upholstery. Without a systematic evaluation of their preventative work, it is not clear what approaches have the greatest impact and represent best value.

153. Services also need to take a more integrated approach to prevention and emergency response. The impact of preventative work should feed into IRMPs, influencing how services deploy emergency response resources. We found many examples where this is happening. Tayside Fire and Rescue have implemented a management structure which tacitly recognises

these links. However, in some services, IRMPs are a relatively static statement of risks, rather than part of a dynamic ongoing process. In these cases, opportunities are being missed to draw on the impact of prevention when considering the deployment of firefighters and fire stations.

Home fire safety visits (HFSVs)

Home fire safety visits are becoming more focused on areas of risk, but there is no consensus between the services in the number they should carry out, how they should be targeted, and how they are completed.

154. All fire and rescue services use home fire safety visits (HFSVs) as a core element of their preventative work. Each year, they carry out a total of around 50,000 visits, providing advice to householders and fitting smoke alarms.

155. However, there are significant variations between the eight services in the way they carry out HFSVs. This is perhaps most obvious in the sharp differences in the proportion of households receiving a visit. In 2009/10, the most recent year for which data is available, this ranged from less than one per cent of households in the Grampian and Central Scotland areas to over six per cent in Tayside (*Exhibit 17 – top*). In earlier years, some services are thought to have counted simple leaflet drops as HFSVs, but our audits did not find any evidence to suggest that this is now a significant issue.

156. Increasingly, in an effort to increase their impact, all services aim to target HFSVs on areas at greatest risk, such as tenements or areas of high deprivation. But there are differences in the risk definitions used by services and how this targeting is carried out. Strathclyde, for example, has introduced a points system, which has led to a dramatic increase

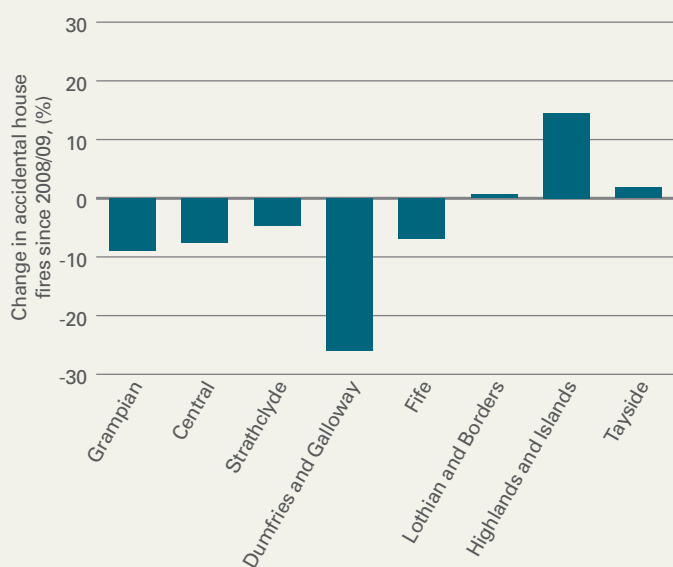
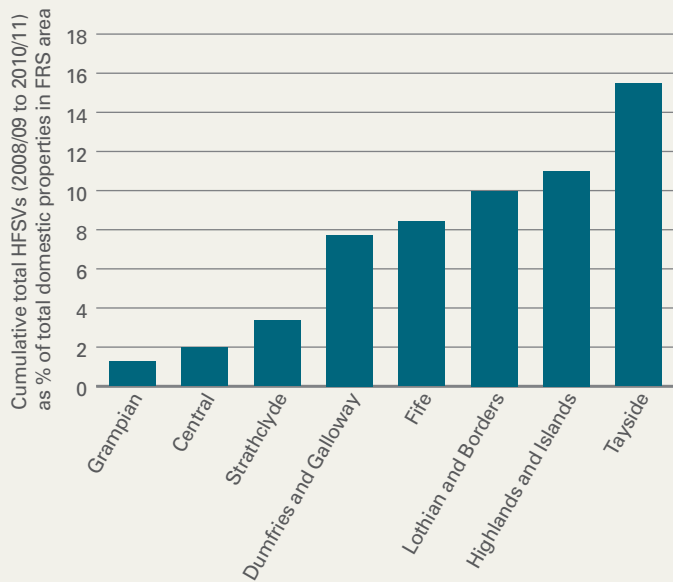
in the number of HFSVs carried out in high-risk houses. Tayside targets many of its HFSVs, but also aims for high-volume 'blanket' coverage, reasoning that this will help safety messages percolate throughout local communities.

157. HFSVs can be an effective way of helping reduce the number of house fires and casualties. The Greenstreet Berman report,⁶ estimates that they led to a fall of 57 per cent in accidental fire deaths in England. However, more needs to be done by Scottish services to demonstrate the impact of their varying approaches to home fire safety visits. This can be complex, with services working within different areas and facing different challenges. Based on existing national data, for example, there is no clear correlation between home fire safety prevention activity and reductions in accidental house fires (*Exhibit 17 – bottom*). Tayside can point to significant falls in the number of casualties, but inconsistencies in definitions between services and over time make it difficult to draw firm conclusions.

158. As well as focusing HFSVs on areas of greatest risk, services also try to identify vulnerable individuals. There are differences in how they identify individuals at greatest risk but, invariably, it involves some form of partnership working with other public services, such as social work, housing and the NHS. Sharing information between these organisations can be vital in helping save lives. This can be easier in unitary councils such as Fife and Dumfries and Galloway, where there is a lack of organisational barriers. But, in recent years, there have been improvements throughout the country in the sharing of intelligence between local government services. However, as mentioned earlier, many chief fire officers expressed a frustration at the difficulties in getting information from the NHS on vulnerable individuals, with differing

Exhibit 17

There is no clear evidence on the impact of preventative activity



Source: Chief Fire Officers Association for Scotland (CFOAS) performance indicators and Scottish Government Statistical Bulletin

interpretations of the requirements of the Data Protection Act being seen as a barrier to progress.

159. There are also differences in who carries out HFSVs. Some services use only full-time firefighters. Some supplement this with dedicated teams. Some use retained firefighters. Others specifically exclude retained firefighters from this role. Others, such as Tayside Fire and Rescue, use partner organisations, particularly from the voluntary sector, to help increase the number of HFSVs and to target 'hard-to-reach' groups.

Fire prevention in businesses

Fire and rescue services are improving the quality of fire safety information they give businesses. But each service takes a different approach to prevention activity.

160. Deaths and injuries from fires in commercial premises are very low compared to those in houses. However, fires in commercial premises can have a devastating effect on businesses, the local economy, and protecting jobs in Scotland. Fire safety in buildings such as offices, factories and hotels is based on self-assessment, with legal obligations imposed on employers and owners to take reasonable fire safety measures. The quality of fire safety self-assessments, however, can vary enormously and fire and rescue services have a valuable role in providing guidance and in carrying out independent checks. Fire and rescue services also provide a wide range of support to businesses including seminars to hotels and local businesses, and training for council building control and housing officers. Fire and rescue services also encourage technology, such as sprinklers and better alarms, to be included in new building developments.

161. Fire and rescue services also carry out a programme of fire audits to provide guidance and to help enforce fire safety standards. In 2010/11, services carried out almost 10,000 fire safety audits in Scotland. All fire and rescue services aim to target this work at those premises which have the greatest life risk, such as care homes, hotels, and houses with multiple occupants. However, in a similar picture to HFSVs, the number of fire audits that the eight Scottish services perform varies widely (Exhibit 18). Again, there is clearly a lack of consensus on risk levels and how often to carry out fire safety audits.

Emergency response

The number of false alarms is still high, although these have started to fall. Emergency response times are not clearly reported to the public but they have remained broadly consistent over time and throughout the country.

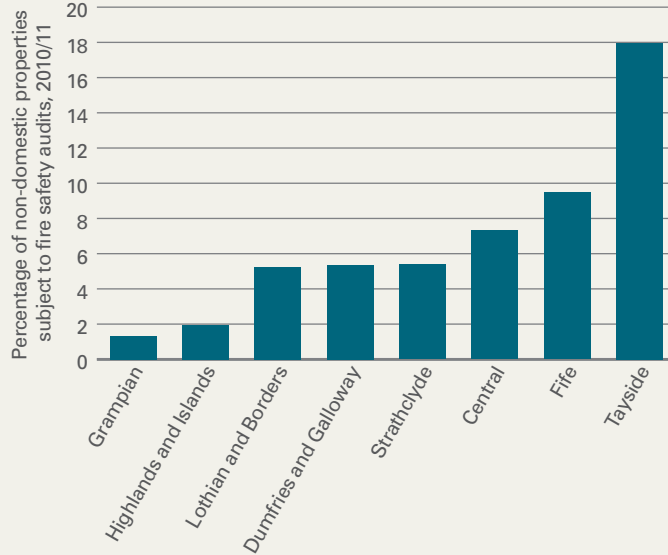
False alarms

162. False alarms place a significant demand on resources and potentially create delays in responding to genuine emergencies. They can be caused by a range of factors – typically faulty automated fire alarm systems – but also by people mistakenly reporting a fire, and by malicious hoax calls. False alarms account for around half of Scotland’s emergency calls, a significantly higher proportion than in England and Wales, where they account for less than a third. This higher rate is almost entirely due to the higher number of automatic false alarms (AFAs) due to faulty equipment, such as smoke alarms.

163. Fire and rescue services are working hard to reduce false alarms and have been successful in reducing malicious or hoax calls. However, only in recent years have they had some success in starting to reduce the number of AFAs (Exhibit 19).

Exhibit 18

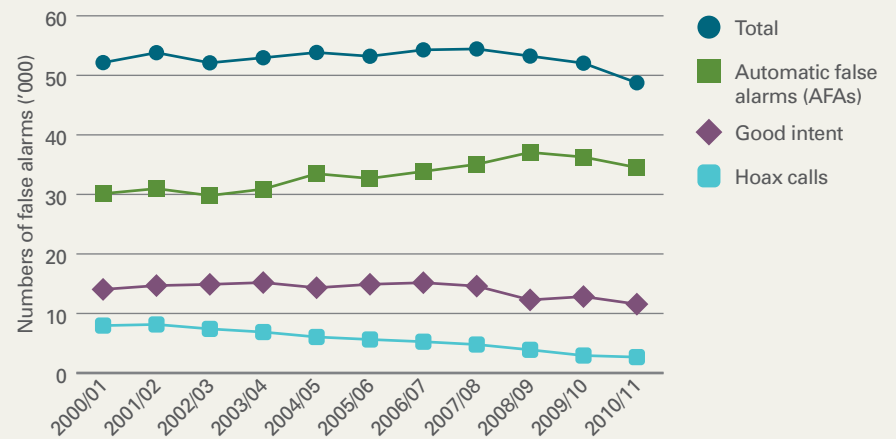
Non-domestic properties subject to fire safety audits



Source: Scottish Government Statistical Bulletin

Exhibit 19

Number of false alarms



Source: Scottish Government Statistical Bulletin

164. Almost all services have reviewed their response to AFAs. As a result, some have changed their predetermined response and now use a risk assessment to help prioritise the mobilisation of fire appliances. This helps reduce the overall number of fire appliances being called into action, improving efficiency and reducing road risk through fewer journeys under blue light conditions. Others have introduced other demand reduction measures such as fire safety seminars for local businesses, call screening and agreements with mobile phone companies. Despite this, there are significant variations in the responses for similar incidents, with some services sending three or four fire engines, while others may send one.

165. False alarms from faulty equipment remain relatively high. In trying to tackle this problem, there may be scope for the new national service to learn from and adopt good practice from services in England and Wales which use stricter mobilisation policies and work more closely with fire alarm suppliers to reduce the numbers of false alarms.

Special services

166. Since 2005, fire and rescue services have had a duty to respond to a wide variety of emergencies, such as road traffic collisions, flooding, chemical spills, and terrorist incidents. The number of these special service incidents is increasing and now represent around 12 per cent of all emergency responses. However, there are few performance measures available locally or nationally to assess the standard of this work.

167. Road traffic collisions are a significant area of activity for fire and rescue services, with around 1,700 serious injuries and 200 deaths per year. Throughout the country, preventative work is led by police forces, with fire and rescue providing

Case study 7

Road safety in Grampian

Grampian Fire and Rescue seconded three crew managers to Grampian Police's dedicated Road Safety Grampian unit. The unit aims to reduce risk on Grampian's roads by delivering educational programmes in the risk sectors of the community. The unit has brought significant benefits in exchanging information and intelligence in developing local strategies and has achieved noticeable success, reducing RTCs by over 20 per cent. Grampian Fire and Rescue has also participated in Operation Zenith, a five-year partnership initiative launched in April 2010 with the core aim of reducing motorcycle casualties on roads within the Grampian region. Operation Zenith made contact with around 4,000 motorcycle riders during the course of the first year and helped bring about a 22 per cent reduction in fatal and serious motorcycle collisions, resulting in it winning five national awards.

Source: Audit Scotland

important support in carrying out educational programmes, such as the hard-hitting 'Safe Drive Stay Alive' campaign. All fire and rescue services participate in other preventative work, aimed particularly at young drivers and motorcyclists. An example is shown at [Case study 7](#). There is evidence that, along with improvements in road and car design, this is having some impact, with the number of RTCs steadily falling over the past decade.

168. As well as preventative work, firefighters also have an important role in providing an emergency response to RTCs, with specialist cutting equipment and training to extract people from vehicles. Invariably, however, any performance monitoring is limited to activity levels or response times, rather than the effectiveness of the work.

169. Responding to flooding incidents is a growing area of activity for fire and rescue services, with significant investment in specialist equipment and training. Again, however, there are no performance measures available locally or nationally to assess the standard of this work, other than activity levels or response times.

Response times

Scotland's fire and rescue services provide an effective response service, but response times vary depending on where people live

170. Most fire and rescue service activity is focused on responding effectively to emergencies. Before 2005, standard emergency response times were set out in the National Standards of Fire Cover, with response times varying according to risk factors associated with different types of buildings. With the introduction of IRMP these national standards were withdrawn, allowing individual fire and rescue services to decide their own speed and level of response based on levels of local risks identified in their IRMP.

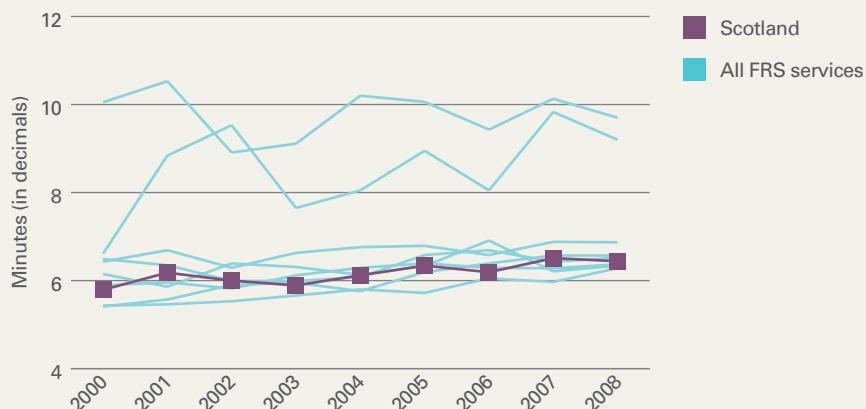
171. It is not easy for members of the public to see what target response time they can expect from their local fire and rescue service. Only three services have developed their own local risk-based set of response standards. Of those, Grampian and Dumfries and Galloway publish their response standards on their website. Even these published standards may not be easy for all members of the public to understand, as the classification of risk is complex and inconsistent.

172. Some services see no value in setting response standards. For example, Strathclyde Fire and Rescue, Scotland's largest service, has not developed a local risk-based set of response standards. They believe these are a flawed approach to managing both emergency response services and public expectations. It simply aims to attend incidents within the shortest period possible and monitors and analyses response times by urban and rural calls, and by travel time and dispatch time.

173. There is currently no standard information on the emergency response times for Scottish fire and rescue services. Some services publish the time taken for the first fire engine to reach an incident; others use the time taken for the second; some publish response times by risk category; others distinguish between urban and rural response times. However, sample data suggests that average response times for house fires have remained broadly consistent over the past decade, apart from rural areas in Highlands and Islands and Dumfries and Galloway, where journey times can be significantly longer ([Exhibit 20](#)).

Exhibit 20

Average emergency response times



Source: *Review of the Implementation and Impact of Integrated Risk Management Planning*, Scottish Fire and Rescue Advisory Unit (SFRAU), 2011

Appendix 1.

Future improvement

A single Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is expected to be established from 1 April 2013. The Scottish Government expects this merger of the existing eight services will generate efficiency savings of around £293 million over 15 years, through measures such as the rationalisation of support services and management costs and better procurement. These savings are expected to help protect front-line services at a time of reduced public sector spending.

Equally importantly, there are greater potential benefits from the harmonisation of good practice and a more consistent focus on prevention and the use of Integrated Risk Management Planning to help achieve a better matching of resources to priority risk areas. This will help to deliver better outcomes for local communities and make best use of increasingly scarce resources.

Many of the priorities and objectives for the new national service are set out in the *Transitional Fire and Rescue Framework* for Scotland 2012. There are, however, difficult decisions which will need to be made, if these are to be achieved. Strong leadership will need to be provided by board members and senior officers in driving through strategic changes.

The move from eight fire and rescue services to a single national service presents opportunities and challenges. In the short term it is essential that the current joint boards and committees maintain a proper oversight of the service during this period of transition and change.

As the new service takes shape there will, though, be a medium- and longer-term agenda for change that will require strong leadership both nationally and locally, if a world-class fire and rescue service for Scotland is to be delivered.

Key actions that will be needed at national and local level are set out [overleaf](#).

Recommendation	Who needs to be involved?
Leadership and governance	
Establish clear measures for success against which the introduction of the new Scottish Fire and Rescue Service can be assessed.	Scottish Government Fire and Rescue Reform Team
Establish clear roles and responsibilities for officers and members within the new Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, underpinned by clear and effective governance arrangements.	Scottish Government Fire and Rescue Reform Team Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Set out a clear framework for local engagement between Local Senior Officers and local authorities/CPPs.	Scottish Government Fire and Rescue Reform Team
Ensure that all of those with key leadership and governance roles at both national and local level are provided with appropriate training and development to enable them to effectively undertake their roles.	Scottish Government Fire and Rescue Reform Team Scottish Fire and Rescue Service COSLA SOLACE
Existing joint board members must maintain effective oversight and challenge of their local services during the period of change and transition to ensure service performance is maintained and their services are properly prepared for integration within the new national service.	Joint Fire and Rescue Authorities COSLA
Ensure that local elected members continue to maintain relevant skills and are provided with sufficient support to represent local needs and interests in the new national service.	Local authorities COSLA
Integrated Risk Management Planning (IRMP)	
Establish a consistent national approach to IRMP, which provides a clear assessment to the public of local community risks, the action taken to mitigate these risks, and an assessment of the success of these measures and future action which needs to be taken.	Scottish Government Fire and Rescue Reform Team Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
While allowing for some local diversity, establish consistent national criteria, based on community risk, for the location of fire stations.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Establish consistent national criteria, based on community risk, for designating fire stations as full-time, retained or volunteer.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Ensure that IRMPs include all areas of activity, such as flooding and road traffic collisions, and are linked to the plans of other emergency services.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Community engagement	
Provide the public with a clear picture of community risks, at a national and local level, and the action being taken to reduce those risks.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Local authorities Community Planning Partnerships
Establish effective processes for communicating with communities about service change and redesign.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Local authorities Community Planning Partnerships
Provide balanced reporting to the public of service performance, at a national and local level, linked to strategic objectives and with a clear statement of areas in need of improvement.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Local authorities Community Planning Partnerships

Recommendation	Who needs to be involved?
Performance management and scrutiny	
Implement a clear and effective framework for performance management which provides members of the national board with sufficient, timely and accurate information on the cost, quality and effectiveness of fire and rescue service performance.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Ensure that performance measures and definitions are consistently applied throughout the country.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Ensure that appropriate support is provided to the national board and local fire and rescue oversight arrangements are in place to enable effective scrutiny and challenge to be delivered.	Scottish Government Fire and Rescue Reform Team Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Local authorities COSLA
Ensure that consistent operational quality assurance arrangements are in place throughout Scotland.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Establish a framework for self-evaluation and ensure it is embedded throughout the service.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Periodically, use external comparisons to help assess the processes and performance of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, using benchmarking information and peer review.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Managing resources	
Implement a strategic IRMP plan for Scotland, which applies a consistent logic to matching resources to community risk.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Establish consistent methodology for costing activities, using this to help assess cost-benefits of areas such as preventative work.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Establish a structured approach to prioritising capital spending at a national level.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Identify the most appropriate ICT systems and establish a programme to establish these throughout the country.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Identify further opportunities for rationalising the level of back-up appliances and equipment.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Identify further opportunities for sharing fleet maintenance with other emergency services.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Establish centres of expertise on areas such as procurement, finance, law, human resources, and ICT.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

Recommendation	Who needs to be involved?
Workforce development	
Establish consistent national approach to the deployment of full-time, retained and volunteer firefighters.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Review arrangement for the recruitment and retention of retained firefighters (including their terms and conditions).	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Review innovative staffing practices across the service (crewing, shift systems, etc.) and develop a medium-term workforce strategy, based on the implementation of best practice.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Monitor progress towards having a diverse workforce that reflects the communities that it serves.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Establish consistent sickness absence policies and monitoring throughout the country.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Ensure that all staff, including retained firefighters and senior officers, receive an annual performance appraisal linked to training and development needs.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Consider establishing a national 'Ticket to Ride' policy, with performance measures that enable senior officers and members to monitor the level and impact of training being provided to firefighters.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Performance	
Establish a consistent framework for preventative work, ensuring that a standard approach is taken to core elements such as home fire safety visits, statutory fire audits, and community education work.	Scottish Government Fire and Rescue Reform Team Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Continue to ensure that the recommendations of the <i>Scotland Together</i> report are fully implemented.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Undertake research into best practice in relation to home fire safety visits (HFSVs), in terms of the extent to which they are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • carried out in high volumes and aimed at all areas of the community • the extent to which they are targeted on high-risk areas and individuals • how this targeting is carried out. 	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
While allowing for local diversity, ensure a consistent approach in the use of dedicated community safety staff, full-time, retained or volunteer firefighters, or the use of other organisations to carry out home fire safety visits.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Ensure there is clarity about the requirements of the Data Protection Act and effective data sharing between public organisations on vulnerable individuals.	Scottish Government
Establish the reasons for the relatively high level of automatic false alarms in Scotland and take steps to bring this into line with the level elsewhere in the UK.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Establish a consistent mobilisation policy for automatic false alarms.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Establish performance standards for special services, such as flooding and road traffic collisions, which do not simply monitor activity levels but help assess the impact of this work.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
While allowing for local IRMP priorities, establish a consistent approach to reporting emergency response times locally.	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

Best Value in fire and rescue services in Scotland

If you require this publication in an alternative format and/or language, please contact us to discuss your needs.

You can also download this document in PDF, black and white PDF or RTF at:
www.audit-scotland.gov.uk



Audit Scotland, 110 George Street, Edinburgh EH2 4LH
T: 0845 146 1010 E: info@audit-scotland.gov.uk
www.audit-scotland.gov.uk

ISBN 978 1 907916 69 4

This publication is printed on 100% recycled, uncoated paper

