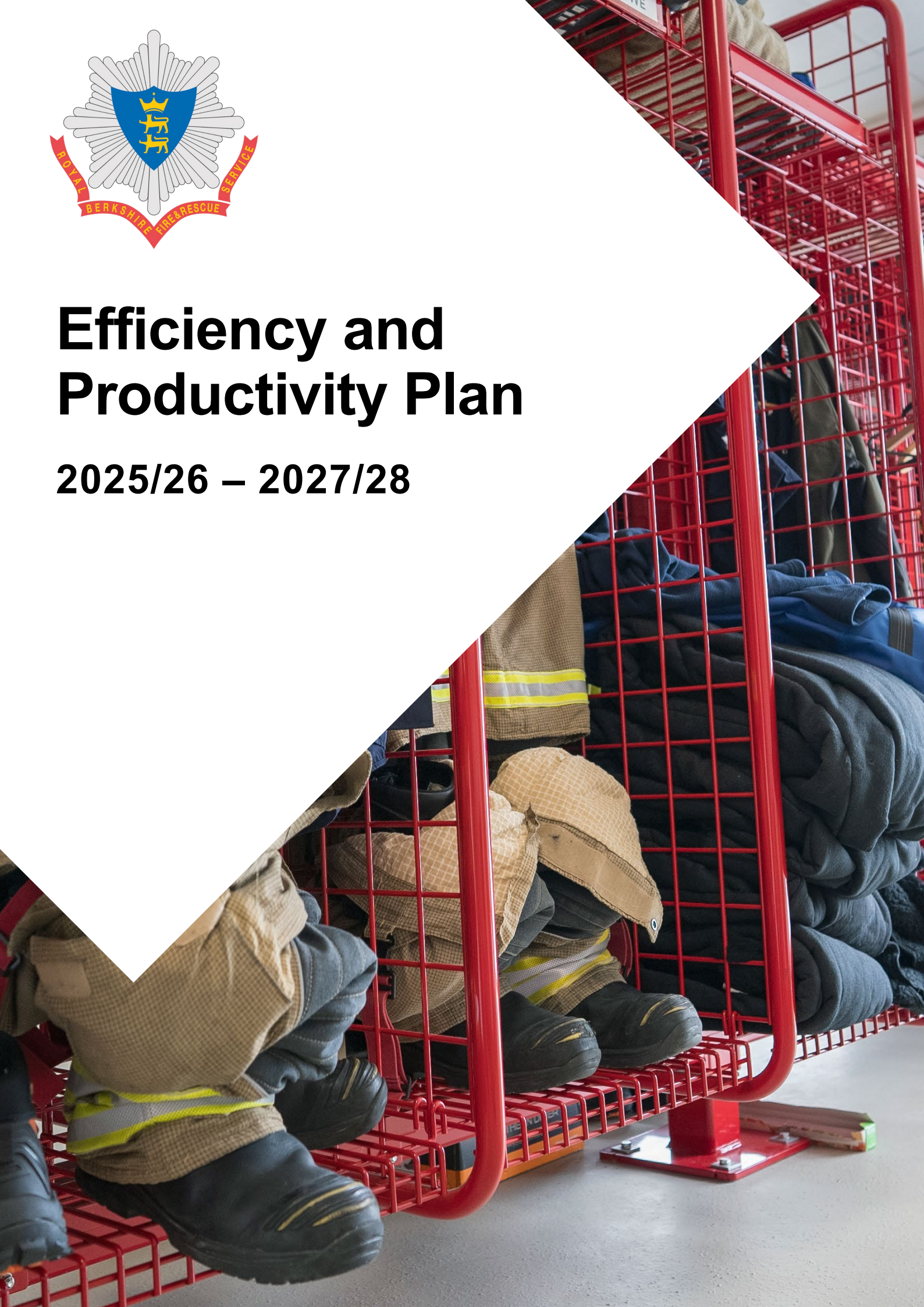




Efficiency and Productivity Plan

2025/26 – 2027/28





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Foreword

Councillor Jeff Brooks, Lead Member for Finance and Chair of RBFA



It is my pleasure, as the Lead Member for Finance, to introduce the Authority's Efficiency and Productivity Plan. Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service has an excellent track record in delivering efficiencies; indeed, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services stated in his second inspection report that, "We are pleased to see that the Service has identified savings and investment opportunities to improve the service to the public or generate further savings."

The Efficiency and Productivity Plan has been drawn up with the express purpose of maximising the resources available to support the Fire Authority's purpose and vision.

Collaborative procurement is seen as one of the drivers of non-pay efficiencies, so the Authority takes an active part in the NFCC Procurement Hub, which enables collaboration between fire and rescue services, promoting national approaches and giving access to a number of fire specific frameworks and resources.

Whilst it is clear that fire and rescue services need to have sufficient resources to provide an emergency response, especially in times of exceptional demand, it is also evident that productivity gains from those resources need to be made by harnessing the use of technology, hence, the focus on IT invest-to-save projects in this Plan.

The Plan also recognises that financial and environmental sustainability are highly correlated; indeed, it is evident that the Authority will face increasing costs and compliance issues if it does not transition to an environmentally sustainable model in the medium term. By investing now to make our estate and fleet more environmentally sustainable we can reduce both the financial impact on our revenue budget as well as reduce our carbon emissions.

In the immediate term, the Authority will prioritise the delivery of corporate priorities but this Plan allows us to consider the medium term so we can capture cashable savings and productivity gains which in turn will generate a new cycle of efficiencies and productivity gains.



Introduction

Like all public services we are committed to delivering value for money across the services we provide. Our drive to improve efficiency has delivered over £1.5 million in savings and income generation over the last two years.

Given the significant cost pressures that the Authority faces, we have used the savings made to invest in the vital services that we provide to the public, while also delivering a balanced budget.

As part of our plan to balance the budget for 2025/26, we will deliver a significant programme of savings and efficiencies as well as initiating a series of invest-to-save projects which will help to alleviate the pressure on the revenue budget in the medium term.

A key priority for the Authority over the coming years is to ensure that the Service is sustainable both from a financial as well as from an environmental perspective. The ability to show a costed plan of how the Authority will transition to a low carbon environment is an important piece of evidence to demonstrate financial sustainability to our auditors.

Given that we have plans for many ambitious change initiatives, a key challenge will be to ensure robust, fully resourced programme and project management arrangements are maintained such that milestones, targets and benefits are achieved within planned timeframes.

As well as implementing these plans it is important that we are able to measure and report progress on a regular basis. We have already developed a robust and holistic performance management framework, with a range of outcome and quality measures that cover the breadth of the Service. We will continue to benchmark against other Services to ensure the appropriateness of our efficiency and productivity targets.

Through 2024/25, in parallel to delivering a series of initiatives, we have implemented a set of principles that enables us to prioritise initiatives that deliver most value to the Service.

Firstly, we have introduced Time and Motion studies, to baseline current ways of working, repeating studies once changes have been implemented, to measure productivity improvements.

We assess changes in the broader context, looking at the impact of change across the organisation, ensuring the impact on our people is understood and that our people are ready and equipped to work in new ways, as change is implemented.



We have introduced a benefit management process, providing a framework to capture, analyse, baseline, track and report progress against benefit targeted or realised. In addition, we use data to prioritise our projects and have created a tool to support this.

We have also focused on governance, establishing the Productivity Board at the start of 2024/25, to provide strategic oversight, direction and monitoring of the Programme, tracking benefit realisation, supporting risk and issue escalations, promoting best practice and continuous improvement through shared project learnings.

Through this forum, we continually assess threats and opportunities ensuring our projects deliver organisational benefit, prioritising initiatives that have the greatest impact. This means the Programme is dynamic and focus is subject to change on an ongoing basis.



Efficiencies, Savings and Income Generation in 2025/26

Given the need to balance the budget over the medium term, we are continually looking to identify where efficiencies could be made from the Revenue Budget to deliver our services to the public in the most efficient and effective way.

Efficiencies can be broken down into three categories: changes to what we do; improved ways of working and reduced contractual expenditure.

Improved Ways of Working

Establishing the permanency of the Facilities, Building and Maintenance Support Team will realise significant savings and benefits whilst providing the Service with a reliable response for reactive repair activities across the estate, along with the ability to complete minor works and projects. This change, together with reduced reliance on external contractors, will yield a saving of £61,000.

Reduced Contractual and Miscellaneous Expenditure

Over the last few years, arrangements have been put in place around procurement and contract management to provide greater visibility and analysis of non-pay expenditure. These arrangements continue to deliver savings on contractual expenditure across the organisation. The biggest saving for 2025/26 will be in relation to utility costs. Falling gas and electricity prices, as well as our initiatives to reduce our carbon footprint will see a reduction in utility costs of around £205,000. Altogether, there will be savings on contractual expenditure amounting to £269,000.

Savings

During 2024/25, a significant investment in training apprentice firefighters was undertaken at an additional cost of £274,000. Given the projected operational staff turnover in 2025/26, it is anticipated that the number of apprentice firefighters required in the coming year will be lower, resulting in a reduced cost for the year of £158,000.



Income Generation

New lease arrangements on two of our former service houses will generate additional income of about £17,000 in 2025/26 while an agreement with West Berkshire Council to rent space at our Headquarters will generate £12,000 per annum.

Efficiencies, savings and income generation are summarised in the table below:

Efficiency Plan Savings from Base Budget	2025/26 £000	2026/27 £000	2027/28 £000	2028/29 £000
Improved ways of working	61	170	25	0
Contractual savings	269	76	0	0
Other savings	158	12	235	44
Additional income generation	29	0	0	0
Total	517	258	260	44

Financial and Environmental Sustainability

As well as addressing immediate pressures in the Revenue Budget, it is essential that we plan to reduce future pressures. To this end, over the medium term, we are devoting a proportion of our capital expenditure to invest-to-save projects that will not only lower utility costs but also reduce our carbon emissions. Projects that we plan to progress over the medium term are set out in our Strategic Asset Investment Framework.



Productivity Gains

Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service operates a lean operational response model. However, this model needs reviewing so the Authority's Community Risk Management Plan incorporates the need to review how we use wholetime and on-call firefighters to ensure that we are optimising the resources that we have available.

A key consideration is whether the current business model affords sufficient time to develop strategy and drive transformation. Ensuring there is sufficient capacity at all levels of the organisation will be essential and this largely relies on being able to recruit to and retain the organisation's middle management who will be key to delivering productivity gains.

We continue to explore where consolidation and automation are possible, gradually rolling out upgrades to our systems and introducing new ways of working. Introducing such changes often comes with a need for training and familiarisation but the long-term efficiency and productivity gains are clear.

Continued business process review and automation has proven to deliver improvements in productivity and efficiency across all staff groups. In recognition of these opportunities and specialist knowledge required to continue on this trajectory, the Service decided to enhance its Microsoft 365 capability improving the confidence of the service users in new functionality, aiding its adoption and faster return on investment.

The creation of our Benefit Tracker tool enables us to track and report against benefit realisation. As of December 2024, 69 benefits were identified and captured.

The table below summarises the productivity and efficiency savings targeted. This information is shown as time savings, in hours:



Initiative	Description	25/26	26/27
MS 365	Ongoing utilisation of application across the organisation to automate and streamline processes	1423	⇒
AI – Consultation Analysis	Use of AI to identify and collate themes from responses to an external consultation thereby reducing the amount of manual analysis	40	⇒
Annual Schools Programme	Efficiency in delivery of awareness training via self-led package rather than face to face	964	⇒
Asset Management Pilot	Pilot to test introduction of software to reduce admin for operational equipment inventories	482	⇒
Finance System Replacement	Replacement of existing system, with a modern version, due to decommissioning of tech support		1924
Fire Safe	Efficiency of case referral improved through semi automation	15	⇒
Unwanted Fire Alarms	Mobilisation changes to reduce callouts to false alarms	1228	⇒
PRF Digitalisation	Transfer of HR forms from paper to electric enabling quick access and negating the need for scanning multiple docs		819
Staff Development System	Introduction of new system with improved usability and accessibility for staff, to reduce time and capacity associated with administration and using multiple systems.		1961
	Total saved (hours):	4152	4704

In addition to the productivity and efficiency benefits, there are broader benefits targeted around quality improvement, risk reduction and user engagement. An example of this is the modernising of the delivery of the Annual Schools Programme. The development of a self-led package has not only begun to generate productivity hours but is improving the reach of its target audience. Initial findings show that its delivery went from 54% to 76% due the new method, thereby communicating the prevention messages to more school pupils. The proactive end to end process review of the At Risk Programme (training in caring for the vulnerable) resulted in an increase in registration: 168 in 23/24 vs 442 in 24/25 YTD and an uplift in the number of attendees by 125% in the same period.



Work completed in 2023/24 - 2024/25 and Benefits Achieved

We have extended the use of Microsoft 365 ecosystem by consolidating other third-party applications delivering the same functionality as that available within the Microsoft 365. This has saved the Service £20,000 in licensing costs, already incorporated in our medium- and long-term planning. It also enabled automation of processes to extend to more areas of the Service. This saving has enabled us to reinvest in pilot projects, that are further expected to deliver productivity savings. Power Bi is an example of this, where funds have been used to purchase licenses, trialling the tool to provide data insights and management information relating to risk visits. The outcome of the pilot will determine how we roll this out more widely, aiding decision making and driving additional productivity savings across the Service.

In addition, the roll out of Microsoft 365 means that the Service is gaining increasing benefits from its ICT infrastructure. Microsoft 365 will provide the functionality to scan directly into SharePoint, which in turn will improve document security and reduce the need for printing.

The new contract for printing solution reduced the committed revenue costs by £10,000 per annum over the duration of the contract. As we move forward, this enables additional benefits to be realised through the digitalisation of processes.

Process Changes using the Microsoft 365 Products

The Coaching Culture tool used for collating 360-degree feedback has been replaced, delivering a cost saving of £10k per annum. The new tool provides equivalent functionality, using tools our people are familiar with, and aligns to IT eco-system.

We've removed heavy admin around training course bookings, through the creation of an App and process automation. This means our people can self-serve and allows the R&D team to easily publish and update courses, saving 60-days per annum, freeing up time to focus on other value add activities.

The pilot of Microsoft's Artificial Intelligence software, Co-Pilot, is enabling further efficiencies in the time spent preparing for meetings, taking minutes and identifying the actions and decisions in meetings. Allowing AI notes to be generated from meeting transcripts, enables them to 'converse' with meetings, pulling out actions and decisions automatically. For an average two-hour meeting, we have seen admin time reduced to by 50%, from 90 to 45 minutes.

Another example of process improvement relates to the reporting of health and safety events, which now uses technology-backed processes to gather and store relevant information.



Automatic Fire Alarms

We've implemented changes to the way we respond to automatic fire alarms, freeing up considerable time across our operational teams. This work has delivered considerable productivity savings, with evaluation activity underway to quantify this.

Automation of Procurement Card and Expense Claims Processes

The project to replace manual expense and procurement card processes with an automated software solution was implemented in the first quarter of 2023/24. The new system gives employees the flexibility to submit a claim easily and quickly via computer, tablet, or smartphone. Managers and the Finance team can now quickly review and approve submissions, saving staff time and lowering processing costs.

The use of this software also improves visibility via dashboards displaying metrics, e.g. expense data can be compiled using charts or reports to view total spend per category or the average time it takes to approve expense claims. The automated system eliminates the use of paper for expenses, contributing to the Authority's Sustainability Strategy. The time and effort required to ensure compliance with policies has also been significantly reduced.

Effective Management of Operational Resources

One of the reasons for creating a Service Delivery Hub model in September 2017 was to decentralise some functional delivery to better serve the needs of local populations. Whilst this has been successful in achieving its aims, it has created pressures in some areas where resourcing has become too lean. In order to address these pressures, a new Operational Support team has been established which has improved the effectiveness of our operational staff in many ways, from better management of crewing to supporting on-call appliance availability by providing cover where required.

Thames Valley Fire Control

The systems underpinning the operations of TVFCS underwent significant upgrades including both hardware and parts of the software platform to improve stability and reduce time when systems could not assure productivity of this vital resource.



Our plan for 2025/26 – 2026/27

Understanding Organisational Productivity - Data Workstream

Through time and motion studies, this project will strengthen data capture to understand capacity and identify and implement change required, repeating time and motion studies to measure improvements.

Better use of Microsoft 365 including Power BI

We will continue to systematically improve processes by utilising functionality available within Microsoft 365. We will extend the system's use to streamline the way in which we gather information and make productivity gains by utilising online forms, enabling a seamless interrogation of data and creating dashboards to aid the management decisions. This will not only have a positive impact on the flow of the processes but also improve our information governance and compliance.

The Microsoft 365 toolset also enables us to deliver other projects, including the digitisation of HR files and modernisation of Risk Management solution, further improving productivity and reducing organisational risk.

Prevention & Protection

The Prevention and Protection Project was initially conceived as a technology replacement project. An opportunity to address Prevention and Protection processes and data architecture presented itself during the preliminary phase of the project in its original form. Widening the scope of the project will ensure our risk data becomes more accessible to the Service and will allow us to leverage data produced across the wider organisation, including a potential for data sharing with partner organisations in the future.

Recognising the increased reach of this project within the organisation, we will invest in resource to conduct a full analysis of business processes/ways of working, considering data accuracy and maintenance, as a prerequisite to replacing technology.

Assets and standard checks digitisation

Enhancements to our equipment and asset management software mean that we will be able to automate the manual checking and recording of operational equipment, removing paper flows from the process and improving data quality.



Each piece of equipment will have a barcode which can be scanned via an app which will transform the management of inventory, standard tests and equipment defects.

This project is under way as a pilot across two stations and is already providing invaluable insights into the rollout of the final solution due to be delivered across 2025/2026.

Staff Development System

The Service currently operates a range of systems and processes underpinning delivery of e-learning courses, management of qualifications, staff feedback, as well as performance and development reviews. It is intended that these systems and processes are replaced and consolidated within one system. The overarching aim of this project is to implement one transparent, integrated, intuitive HR information and learning system to facilitate organisational growth, development, and performance. Full specification has been developed and procurement is ongoing at the time of publication of this Plan, with an aim of delivering the solution to the Service within 2025/26.

Finance System Replacement

With our current solution at end of life, we will implement a new modern, more functionally rich system. Processes and ways of working will be reviewed and changed to maximise the benefits associated with this.

Personal Record File Digitisation

This project will enable quicker access to personal record files and enable fast and secure transfer of relevant information. By eliminating the need to retain paper copies it will further support our Sustainability Strategy. Digitisation will also allow us to demonstrate compliance in a less resource-intensive way. Due to pressures and risks which materialised during 2024/25, the project had to be postponed and is now expected to be delivered during 2025/26.

Upgrade to Firewatch 7.8

This project will deliver a newer version of our core HR system, providing an improved user experience and a more intuitive solution, as well as giving access to new features and dashboards. This will deliver productivity savings and enable better decision making, through easy access of management information. Changes to the way in which it is being hosted will improve



the utilisation of technical resources involved in management of the solution and improving business continuity arrangements relating to this key resource.

Thames Valley Fire Control Service

Our Thames Valley Fire Control Service relies on Computer Aided Dispatch software which allows to capture information critically required to provide the fastest and most accurate dispatch of resources to incidents reported. In recognition of complexity in delivering a system of this criticality and attempt to make the rollout as efficient as possible, we will invest our efforts in creating a detailed specification and plan which will allow us to capture the learning from other services and our own staff before creating appropriate plans assisting in most efficient deployment of this system. This work is likely to span multiple years, and future plans will provide appropriate updates reflecting the work completed and planned for future years.

Productivity workstreams are summarised below.



Productivity Work Plan		
2024-2025	2025-2026	2026-2027
1. Business Process Review	1. Business Process Review	1. Business Process Review
2. Better use of MS 365	2. Better use of MS 365	2. Better use of MS 365
3. Power BI	3. Power BI	3. Power BI
4. Prevention and Protection enterprise architecture	4. Prevention and Protection enterprise architecture	
5. Assets and standard checks digitisation	5. Assets and standard checks digitisation	
6. Automatic Fire Alarms	6. Staff Development System	
7. Staff Development System	7. Personal Record File Digitisation	
8. Multi-Functional Device replacement and printing	8. Finance System Replacement	
9. Personal Record File Digitisation	9. Firewatch 7.8	
10. Time and motion studies	10. TVFCS - CAD business analysis	
11. Finance System Replacement		
12. Firewatch 7.8		



ICT Strategy

The 2024-2029 ICT Strategy underpins the delivery of this Plan and will harness the best available technology, to enhance service delivery, operational efficiency and resilience. This Strategy will address emerging public sector trends and will incorporate advancements in ICT and data, including artificial intelligence, to future-proof the organisation's capabilities. The new Strategy has been approved and will build further upon our use of Microsoft 365 and will be key to identifying future projects to support the delivery of the Efficiency and Productivity Plan.



Transformation Fund

The Fire Authority has allocated £900k to a Transformation Fund to support improved ways of working within the Service. The table below includes all funding that has been allocated to-date. For 2025/26, it is intended to allocate a further £126,000 to the Transformation Fund to support the delivery of the Productivity Programme and ensure the realisation of intended benefits as outlined in the Productivity Gains section. In allocating the Transformation Fund, the Authority will monitor the return on the investment through six monthly reports to the Management Committee.

Description	Period	Funding Allocated
Asset Management Project Assistant	18 Months	33,320
M365 and Business Process Improvement Specialist	2 Years	93,938
Business Analyst – Prevention and Protection	18 Months	105,000
Technical Project Manager	2 Years	136,210
Community & Risk Analyst	18 Months	58,743
CRMP Priority Three Group Manager Change and Improvement	2 Years	148,867
CRMP Priority Three Station Manager Change and Improvement	2 Years	128,606
Organisational Development Project Manager	12 Months	93,150
Learning and Development Manager	12 Months	80,730
HR Advisor supporting CRMP Priority Three	2 Years	21,436
Total		900,000
Additional funds for 2025/26		126,000



Risks and Mitigation Around Delivery of Plan

The risks and mitigation strategies regarding the Efficiency and Productivity Plan are shown below.

Risk	Mitigation
There will be insufficient resources available to re-engineer business processes and embed cultural change due to budgetary constraints.	The Authority has recognised that a challenging and ambitious programme of change will require additional short-term resource to ensure a successful transformation in culture and business processes. The Transformation Reserve will be used to fund invest-to-save projects.
Even if the overall savings target can be met, the organisation may be unable to deliver savings quickly enough to balance annual budgets.	The Authority has a budget contingency reserve to fund temporary budgetary shortfalls.
The savings target may be insufficient to balance the budget.	The Medium-Term Financial Plan will be updated when necessary, so that changes in projected income and expenditure can be quickly communicated and changes to savings targets adjusted accordingly.



Conclusion and Governance Arrangements

The Efficiency and Productivity Plan forms part of a suite of strategic planning documents that we use to set corporate priorities against affordability constraints. The Plan not only allows us to make the most of the current resources at our disposal, it also sets out a programme of work that will reduce revenue budget costs and generate income in the coming years.

The Plan is a snapshot in time and to drive forward efficiency and productivity we will continue to make effective use of benchmarking opportunities to improve value for money. We will also continue to seek out collaborative opportunities with other organisations, especially in the Thames Valley, to increase efficiency. For example, we will look to jointly procure operational equipment to ensure the Thames Valley's response to emergency incidents is consistent.

Progress against this Plan will be reported internally through the Productivity Board and externally through Fire Authority.



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