Efficiency and Productivity Plan

2026/27 – 2029/30

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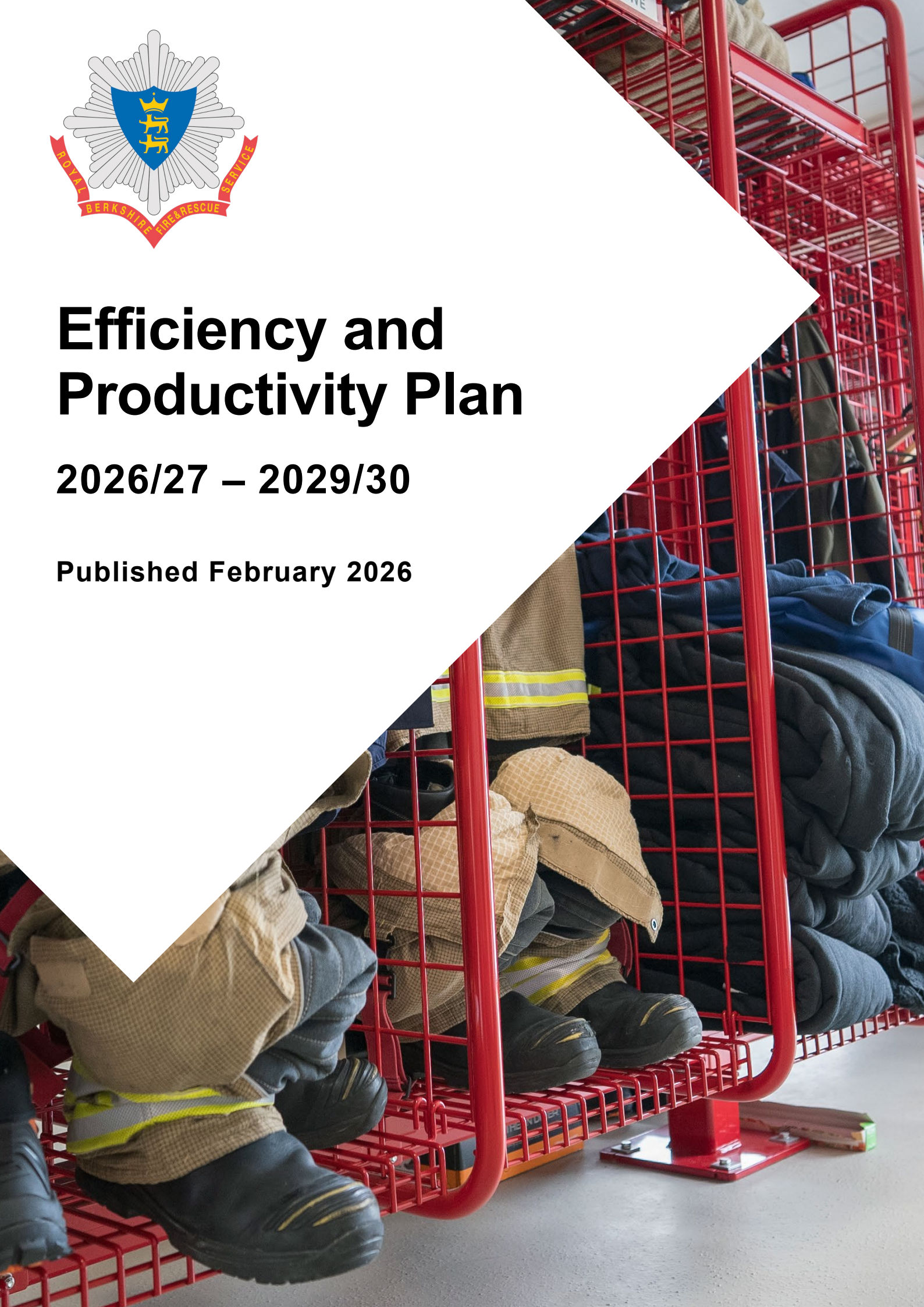

Contents

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 2025 inspection report that, "The service has put in place the capacity and capability it needs to achieve sustainable transformation, and it routinely looks for opportunities to work with others to improve efficiency and provide better services in the future."

The Efficiency and Productivity Plan shows cashable savings and non-cashable savings over a four-year period. It 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. An example of collaborative procurement that will take place in 2026/27 is the purchasing of a new command-and-control system for Thames Valley Fire Control Service that will be undertaken jointly with Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Services.

While it is clear that fire and rescue services must 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 the 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.

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 £645,000 in savings and income generation in 2024/25. However, given the challenging economic backdrop, it is imperative that we accelerate our drive to increase efficiency and productivity, particularly through the use of ICT systems and processes.

This new Plan sets out an ambitious target of savings and efficiencies that will support a balanced budget over the medium term. The four-year programme will incorporate organisational service redesign as well as continuing the rollout of a series of invest-to-save projects which will help to alleviate future pressures on the revenue budget. The organisation continues to embrace ICT to improve productivity and deliver non-cashable savings.

A key priority for the Authority over this period 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.

In preparation for the implementation of this Plan, we have assessed capacity in the broader context, looking at the impact of change across the organisation, ensuring the impact on our people is understood and that we are ready and equipped to work in new ways, as change is implemented.

We continue to manage our efficiency projects using a framework that captures and tracks progress against target benefits. Productivity Board continues to provide strategic oversight, direction and monitoring of the programme of works, supporting risk and issue escalations, promoting best practice and continuous improvement through shared project learnings.

Cashable Efficiencies, Savings and Income Generation 2026/27 to 2029/30

The Authority has set an ambitious target of delivering cashable efficiencies and savings amounting to £4 million over the next four years. The overarching aim of the Plan is to deliver savings through business process reengineering, which in many cases will be underpinned from the investment in information technology.

Cashable Efficiencies	2026/27 £000	2027/28 £000	2028/29 £000	2029/30 £000
Protection Function Restructure	100			
Improved management of station staff and flexi-duty officer budgets	100			
Removal of Direct Entry Post	92			
Unitary Council Funding for Protection Post	28			
Reduced Contractual Expenditure	510	30		170
Business Support Restructure	100			
Finance system business process saving	25			
Change 100	33			
Service Redesign	53	970	1,000	830
Total	**1,041**	**1,000**	**1,000**	**1,000**

Non-Cashable Efficiencies

The Authority is also harnessing technology to drive through non-cashable efficiencies in the organisation. Non-cashable efficiencies, both delivered and anticipated, are shown in the table below.

Non-Cashable Saving / Benefit	Delivered £000	Anticipated £000
M365 Savings	27	
Mobilisation changes to reduce callouts to false alarms	41	
Asset Management - phase 2		62
Breathing Apparatus Project		29
M365 Copilot for Meeting Preparation and Outputs		1
Operational Risk Information Digital Solution		9
PRF Digitalisation.		15
Staff Development System		48
Total	**68**	**162**

Case Studies

Case Study: Finance System Replacement Project

Reason for the Project

The Authority has a statutory duty to ensure the proper administration of its financial affairs. The current solution, Sage 1000 has reached end-of-life so continuing to use this outdated system poses risks, including potential non-compliance with regulatory requirements and increased organisational risk due to reliance on obsolete technology. The current system is also labour-intensive, lacking automation and had not seen enhancements for several years.

Solution

After a thorough market engagement and procurement process, we selected Technology One as the replacement finance system. Technology One is a cloud-based solution designed for the public sector and already in use by several other fire and rescue services. The new system will provide rich functionality, improved integration, automation, data visualisation and reduced organisational risk. It also supports flexible authorisation methods, which are increasingly important in a hybrid working environment.

Benefits

Reduced Financial Risk: A supported system will reduce the risk of fiscal non-compliance which currently exists.

Future Productivity Gains: The new system will be updated with enhancements every six months which will allow further automation of internal processes and better integration with the organisation's other ICT systems.

Increased Efficiency: Productivity improvements will be delivered through the automation of manual processes, with **cashable savings of 1FTE amounting to £25,000 from April 2026**. Further efficiencies are envisaged through the use of AI which in turn should lead to further cashable savings.

Enhanced User Experience: Current user testing shows very positive initial feedback which should lead to better user engagement with financial management.

Real-Time Data: Integration of non-financial data will lead to better decision-making.

Process Automation: Fewer manual interventions and mistakes.

Removal of Legacy Costs: Decommissioning old servers and associated costs.

Case Study: Protection restructure

Reason for the Project

The regulatory landscape for Fire Safety has changed significantly over the last 5 years, driven by the Grenfell Tower Inquiry, the Building Safety Act, Fire Safety (England) Regulations, and the requirement for residential evacuation plans by April 2026. These developments have increased complexity and demand within the Protection function and have identified organisational risks in the following areas:

- Lack of availability of Fire Safety Inspectors for out-of-hours enforcement.
- High staff turnover due to the availability of higher-paid roles in the private sector.
- Limited internal capacity for fire investigation to support the Thames Valley collaboration.
- HMICFRS has also identified the need for improved prioritisation of enforcement activity.

Solution

To address these challenges, we are undertaking a comprehensive restructure of the Protection function. The new model proposes a dedicated management layer to provide focused leadership and governance. It will integrate the Legal and Enforcement Hub into the wider Protection team to improve resilience and efficiency. The restructure creates a Business Fire Safety Team incorporating Grey Book roles, introduces out-of-hours provision for fire safety enforcement and fire investigation, and embeds fire investigation responsibilities into six posts to meet Thames Valley collaboration commitments. It also establishes a clear progression pathway and salary enhancements to improve retention, while leveraging external partnerships for specialist support such as fire engineering and legal services.

Benefits

The proposed changes will deliver significant benefits for RBFRS and the communities it serves. A dedicated management structure will strengthen governance, accountability, and strategic oversight, while the integration of legal and enforcement functions will streamline operations and reduce costs. The introduction of out-of-hours provision and enhanced fire investigation capability will improve operational resilience and ensure compliance with statutory duties. Clear career pathways and financial incentives will support staff retention and development, reducing the impact of turnover. Importantly, the restructure is projected to deliver **a cashable financial saving of £100,000 (3 posts)**, demonstrating RBFRS's commitment to achieving more for less while mitigating key corporate risks and aligning with strategic commitments on protection, resilience, sustainability, and people.

Case Study: Digitalised Operational Risk Information Processes

Why This Project Is Needed

Information often arrives to Risk Information and Emergency Planning Officers (RIEPOs) in inconsistent formats, incomplete or on the wrong forms. This inconsistency leads to delays, increased workload for both RIEPOs and station staff and the risk of critical information being unavailable to crews.

Solution

Shift from paper-based and manual processes to digital, using Microsoft 365 Forms from December 2025:

- **Developing tailored Microsoft 365 forms** for different types of visits (7(2)(d) visits to low, medium, and new premises, and familiarisation visits to high-risk sites), ensuring the right information is captured for each scenario.
- **Integrating the change request forms** into a single digital form, with automated notifications to all relevant teams and built-in reminders for follow-up actions.
- **Ensuring all submissions are directed to a central RIEPO inbox** rather than being entered directly into the IBIS system by crews, maintaining data integrity and oversight.

Anticipated Benefits

- **Increased efficiency:** Automated notifications and reminders will save 328 hours equivalent to **a non-cashable benefit of £8,700 per annum** for both RIEPOs and station staff, allowing them to focus on higher-value tasks.
- **Improved data quality and completeness:** Crews will be guided to provide all necessary information, reducing the need for follow-up and ensuring risk data is accurate and up to date.
- **Enhanced safety:** Timely and accurate risk information will be available to crews, supporting better decision-making and operational response.
- **Reduced risk of missed or outdated information:** Centralised, automated processes minimise the chance of critical details being overlooked.
- **Better auditability and reporting:** Data will be easier to interrogate and manage, supporting compliance and continuous improvement efforts.
- **Cost-effectiveness:** The forms are quick to create, require no additional cost, and leverage existing staff familiarity with Microsoft 365 tools.

Case Study: Staff Development System (SDS) Project

Reason for the Project

Staff development and performance are manged using a mix of systems and manual processes. These systems are not integrated, leading to inefficiencies, increased administrative burden and challenges in data management and reporting. The current approach has usability and accessibility issues for both managers and staff. The need for a modern, integrated solution has become crucial, especially as key legacy systems (Smart Assessor and LMS) are reaching end-of-support.

Solution

Implement a new transparent, integrated and intuitive HR information and learning management system which will:

- Replace multiple legacy systems (Smart Assessor, LMS, Coaching Culture)
- Digitise manual processes (e.g., PDR, course bookings)
- Integrate with existing platforms (M365, FireWatch, Entra (single sign on), Intranet)
- Provide a one-stop shop for staff development, performance management and training
- Ensure accessibility across devices and compliance with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)
- Support robust data management, analytics and reporting, including GDPR compliance

Benefits

- **Efficiency Gains:** Reduced time and capacity burden for staff and managers by consolidating systems and digitising processes:
    - The time and workload for managers and central teams (including R&D, HR, BIS and Procurement) will be reduced because: procurement processes are streamlined from three steps to one; contract management requirements are cut by two-thirds; and system development, administration and support now require only one system instead of three to five. As a result, monthly hours are targeted to drop from 15 to 5 from August 26.
    - The PDR process is expected to increase productivity by 325 hours per year, which amounts to 30 minutes saved per person.
    - Evidence gathering to support PDR preparation and objective setting: 325 hours per year (30 mins per employee) and 140 hours (30 mins per manager for each subordinate).

- Objective tracking & 1:1s: 288 hours saved yearly (2 minutes per 121, 26 minutes per person per year)
- HR administration: 163 hours saved
- 360-degree feedback: 81 administrative hours saved (10 mins per person)
- DAPs: 207 user, 86 assessor, 9.5 assurer hours saved each year
- Training/upskilling reduced by 50% for assessors, IQAs, trainers (350 hours/year)

Anticipated Total savings: 1801.5 hours from March 2027

- **Improved Data and Reporting:** Enhanced data accuracy, analytics and reporting to support evidence-based decision-making and compliance (GDPR, Equality Act, audits with targeted savings of 24 days/177.6 hours per annum expected from October 2026.
- **User Experience:** The improved usability will release time and capacity across the Service in creating an improved and intuitive user experience supporting self-service and streamlined administration.
- **Organisational Growth:** Better talent management, succession planning and identification of potential through improved visibility of development and performance outcomes.
- **Future-Proofing:** Flexible, scalable solution with ongoing support and integration capabilities.
- **Security and Compliance:** Improved data security, single sign-on and robust data management.

In total, it is expected that the project will deliver **non-cashable savings of £47,775 per annum**.

Case Study: Breathing Apparatus Project

Reason for the Project:

The Learning and Development (L&D) function faced operational and capacity challenges in delivering the BA Development Programme. The existing model required six structured development wears, with the final two involving live fire conditions. While this was intended to streamline development and reduce L&D demand, it instead increased resource requirements, reduced resilience and created inconsistencies in assessment. Persistent issues included:

- High instructor demand and limited availability, compounded by recruitment difficulties and ongoing sickness.
- Frequent cancellations of courses and assurance wears, leading to delays and increased anxiety among staff.
- National inconsistency, with RBFRS being the only UK service to embed live fire wears in its BA development programme.
- Projected recruitment of over 50 new staff between 2026 and 2029, which would intensify existing capacity issues.
- Operational impacts such as pay claims and increased workload for the Resource and Development Team due to delays in development and assessment

Solution:
To address these challenges, key changes to the BA Development Programme have been proposed:

- **5th Development Wear:** Transition from a live fire (Fire Behaviour Training – FBT) session to a structured cold BA assessment, conducted at six months post-acquisition, focusing on the BA Number One / Team Leader role, delivered using synthetic smoke. This requires fewer instructors and less time away from watches.
- **6th Development Wear:** Change from a second live fire session to a standard BA revalidation assessment, conducted within 12 months of acquisition, delivered by qualified BA instructors at the Training Centre, aligning with existing revalidation processes and national standards.
- **Qualified Instructor Delivery:** All BA wears five and six will continue to be conducted by internal BA instructors and/or external Station Based BA Instructors to maintain consistency and robustness.

- **Policy Update:** Amend the BA Training and Assessment Policy to reflect the revised assurance process, followed by appropriate consultation.
- **Monitor and Review:** Evaluate the new model post-implementation in 12 months to ensure effectiveness, with quarterly performance reporting.

Benefits:

Expected Benefits – Time and Capacity

NB: Rate of instruction for a day is based on an ARA instructor requirement at WMB overtime rate £33.02 (hourly overtime rate not including on-costs). Day length 8 hours. This rate may vary depending on the role undertaking BA duties. £264.16 day rate.

For every day saved a further 4 instructors days are freed up providing time to undertake other L&D activity.

Current Demand

24 staff require a 5th wear assessment resulting in a minimum of one less instructor day for each day of assessment (assuming the current arrangement two wears a day) this results in:

Minimum 12 instructor days saved (will increase with more assessments planned in a day, noting that for every day saved a further 4 instructors days are freed up providing time to undertake other L&D activity).

Minimum financial saving of £3,169 instructor cost (will increase if not requiring instructors at higher roles and the number of assessment days over all improves).

Those 24 staff will also require a 6th wear, if this becomes the revalidation the further 6 month assessment will cease to be required and will save:

60 instructor days - 5 instructor days per assessment day (x 12 days assuming two assessment per day)

Minimum financial saving of £6,340 based on two external BA is not being required per assessment day

Total – 72 instructor days saved and minimum financial savings £9,509.

Plus – 24 student extraction days.

Years 2026 – 2029

Assuming 50 new staff requirements for 5th wear and revalidation:

25 days minimum – 5th wear assessments - £ 6,604 minimum financial saving

125 days (25 x 5 instructor days for removal of 6 month revalidation) and assume 2 external BA is required minimum of £13,208

Totalling 150 instructor days and £19,812 minimum financial savings.

Plus 50 student extraction days

Overall minimum estimation of savings (Note this does not include staff extraction and consequential overtime savings):

Until 2029 = 222 instructor days and minimum **£29,321 non-cashable savings**.

Plus 74 student extraction days

Case Study: Asset Management Project

Reason for the Project

The 2022 HMICFRS inspection highlighted that RBFRS needed to make more effective use of its resources. A key challenge was the manual, time-consuming process of tracking and auditing equipment on front-line fire appliances. Additionally, inconsistent formats and lack of digitalisation created inefficiencies and operational risk.

Solution

To introduce an automated asset management system. This was piloted, as a proof-of-concept, in two stations and involved:

- Digitising the end-to-end inventory process for operational equipment.
- Implementing a system that works reliably at stations, with guidance and training for crews.
- Establishing maintenance processes for issues such as damaged labels.
- Treating the initiative as a change management exercise, with stakeholder engagement and clear success criteria.

The pilot finished in March 2025 and the go ahead was given to rollout the process to all other stations from November 2025 to October 2026.

Anticipated Benefits

- **Enhanced Data Accuracy**: Improvement in the quality of equipment data by removing the requirement for manual updates to Excel spreadsheets.
- **Audit Trail:** Enable full accurate auditable trail for entire lifecycle of all operational items.
- **Reduction in effort:** Reduction in time taken to perform inventories and track and repatriate equipment.
- **Decrease in Transportation time and cost:** reduced costs due to less physical swapping of equipment items.
- **Better financial expenditure:** Tighter control of replacements leading to better budget management due to more accurate tracking of asset lifecycle resulting in fewer unnecessary defects / decommissioning.

This project is anticipated to deliver **non-cashable savings of £61,693**.

Case Study: Modernisation of RBFRS Infrastructure Through Migration to Microsoft Azure

Reason for the Project

RBFRS's IT infrastructure was facing major challenges:

- **Aging Hardware:** The existing virtualisation and storage hardware had exceeded its standard lifecycle and was running on extended support, leading to escalating maintenance and licensing costs.
- **Performance and Security Risks:** Legacy systems imposed performance constraints, limited scalability, and increased security risks.
- **Strategic Modernisation Trigger:** These issues collectively triggered the need for a strategic initiative to modernise and future-proof RBFRS's IT environment.

Solution

The project delivered a comprehensive migration to Microsoft Azure, including:

- **Azure Landing Zone:** Designed and implemented a secure, scalable, and compliant Azure environment, covering both primary and disaster recovery regions. This included integration with Active Directory, network connectivity, security, monitoring, and governance frameworks.
- **Domain Controller Builds:** Deployed and configured virtual machines as domain controllers, ensuring seamless integration with existing on-premises infrastructure.
- **Phased Workload Migration:** Critical workloads (such as Mobile Data Terminal, Ordnance Survey Map Data, Database Server, Sage, IBIS, and Geographic Information System) were migrated to Azure using Azure Migrate and Azure Data Studio, with a phased approach to minimise disruption and allow thorough testing.

Key Benefits

1. Enhanced Resilience and Disaster Recovery

- Azure's geo-replication and Site Recovery features provide robust disaster recovery, ensuring business continuity and rapid recovery in case of failure.

2. Improved Security and Compliance

- Integrated Azure-native security features (firewall, distributed denial of service protection, Defender for Cloud, comprehensive monitoring) have significantly strengthened RBFRS's

security posture.
- Governance frameworks, policies, and tagging strategies ensure ongoing compliance and effective resource management.

3. Operational Efficiency and Flexibility
- Modernised infrastructure reduces reliance on legacy hardware, streamlines IT operations, and enables rapid scaling to meet future needs.
- Phased migration minimised disruption and allowed for thorough validation at each stage.

4. Cloud Enablement for Public Safety Operations
- The new platform supports future digital transformation and innovation, improves service delivery for critical public safety operations, and enables hybrid and cloud-native approaches for future deployments.

5. Cost Savings
- Over a six-year period, the total cost of ownership for the Azure solution is estimated at £415,000 compared to £820,000 for maintaining and upgrading on-premises systems — **a cashable saving of £405,000 over six years.**
- Additional financial benefits include predictable costs, reduced hardware refresh cycles, simplified licensing, and lower maintenance and support overheads.

6. Knowledge Transfer and Future Readiness
- Comprehensive design documentation was produced to support ongoing operations and future enhancements.

Additional Financial and Operational Benefits

- **Predictable Costs:** Azure's fixed annual cost and transparent pricing eliminate unexpected capital outlays and simplify budgeting.
- **Reduced Hardware Refresh Cycles:** Cloud migration reduce the need for periodic hardware upgrades and associated procurement cycles.
- **Reduced Licensing Complexity:** Azure includes core infrastructure, security, and backup services, reducing the need for separate licensing (e.g., VMware, NetApp).
- **Lower Maintenance and Support Overheads:** Azure's managed services reduce the burden on internal IT teams, freeing resources for strategic projects.
- **Scalability and Flexibility:** Azure enables rapid scaling and adaptation to changing needs without additional capital investment.
- **Enhanced Security and Compliance:** Integrated security features and compliance frameworks are included in Azure, reducing risk and cost.

- **Disaster Recovery and Business Continuity:** Azure's geo-replication and site recovery capabilities provide robust DR
- **Lower Maintenance Overhead:** Reduced on-premises footprint decreases maintenance, patching, and support demands

***Direct Cost Comparison**

Cost Element	**On-Premises (6 Years)** Estimated cost	**Hybrid Azure Cloud (6 Years)** Estimated Cost
Hardware Upgrade	£160,000 (one-off) – 8 Hosts	£8,000 (one-off) Refresh for 2 Hosts for On-prem Server running on Microsoft Hyper-V
VMware License Renewal – VMWare Cloud Foundation (VCF)	£300,000 over 6 years	N/A as VMWare to Hyper-V project is underway
NetApp Storage Replacement	£100,000 (one-off) Over 6 years	Storage Included in Azure £12,000 to Built-in storage for Servers – over 6 years
Migration Implementation	£20,000 (one-off)	£57,000 (one-off)
Running Costs over 6 Years	-	£252,000
Microsoft Licenses (Windows Server & SQL)	£240,000 Over 6 Years	£86,000 Plans to Reduce SQL Enterprise Cores in Azure from 2026
Total	**£820,000**	**£415,000**

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 is being 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 are about to jointly procure a new command and control system for Thames Valley Fire Control Service which will not only ensure maximum efficiency but will also provide control room staff with the latest functionality to ensure effective mobilisation of resources to incidents.

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

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