



Royal Berkshire Fire Authority

Auditor's Annual Report
Year ending 31 March 2025

19 February 2026



Contents

01	Introduction and context	3
02	Executive summary	5
03	Opinion on the financial statements and use of auditor's powers	9
04	Value for Money commentary on arrangements	12
	Financial sustainability	14
	Governance	18
	Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness	22
05	Summary of Value for Money Recommendations raised in 2024/25	28
Appendices		30
A	Responsibilities of the Authority	31
B	Value for Money Auditor responsibilities	32
C	Follow-up of previous improvement recommendations	33

The contents of this report relate only to those matters which came to our attention during the conduct of our normal audit procedures which are designed for the purpose of completing our work under the NAO Code and related guidance. Our audit is not designed to test all arrangements in respect of value for money. However, where, as part of our testing, we identify significant weaknesses, we will report these to you. In consequence, our work cannot be relied upon to disclose all irregularities, or to include all possible improvements in arrangements that a more extensive special examination might identify. We do not accept any responsibility for any loss occasioned to any third party acting, or refraining from acting, on the basis of the content of this report, as this report was not prepared for, nor intended for, any other purpose.

Grant Thornton UK LLP is a limited liability partnership registered in England and Wales: No.OC307742. Registered office: 8 Finsbury Circus, London, EC2M 7EA. A list of members is available from our registered office. Grant Thornton UK LLP is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority. Grant Thornton UK LLP is a member firm of Grant Thornton International Ltd (GTIL). GTIL and the member firms are not a worldwide partnership. Services are delivered by the member firms. GTIL and its member firms are not agents of, and do not obligate, one another and are not liable for one another's acts or omissions.

01 Introduction and context

Introduction

This report brings together a summary of all the work we have undertaken for Royal Berkshire Fire Authority during 2024/25 as the appointed external auditor. The core element of the report is the commentary on the value for money (VfM) arrangements. The responsibilities of the Fire Authority (the Authority) are set out in Appendix A. The Value for Money Auditor responsibilities are set out in Appendix B.

Opinion on the financial statements

Auditors provide an opinion on the financial statements which confirms whether they:

- give a true and fair view of the financial position of the Authority as at 31 March 2025 and of its expenditure and income for the year then ended
- have been properly prepared in accordance with the CIPFA/LASAAC Code of practice on local authority accounting in the United Kingdom 2024/25
- have been prepared in accordance with the requirements of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014

We also consider the Annual Governance Statement and undertake work relating to the Whole of Government Accounts consolidation exercise.

Auditor's powers

Auditors of a local authority have a duty to consider whether there are any issues arising during their work that require the use of a range of auditor's powers.

These powers are set out on page 12 with a commentary on whether any of these powers have been used during this audit period.

Value for money

We report our judgements on whether the Authority has proper arrangements in place regarding arrangements under the three specified criteria:

- financial sustainability
- governance
- Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness

The Value for Money auditor responsibilities are set out in Appendix B.

The National Audit Office (NAO) has consulted on and updated the Code to align it to accounts backstop legislation. The new Code requires auditors to share a draft Auditor's Annual Report (AAR) with those charged with governance by a nationally set deadline each year, and for the audited body to publish the AAR thereafter. This new deadline requirement is introduced from 30 November 2025 and applies to 2024/25 audits.

02 Executive Summary

Executive Summary – our assessment of value for money arrangements

Our overall summary of our Value for Money assessment of the Authority's arrangements is set out below. Further detail can be found on the following pages.

Criteria	2023/24 Assessment of arrangements	2024/25 Risk assessment	2024/25 Assessment of arrangements
Financial sustainability	A No significant weaknesses identified; improvement recommendations raised in relation to the reporting and development of savings plans, and use of sensitivity analysis.	No risks of significant weakness identified.	G No significant weaknesses in arrangements identified and no improvement recommendations raised.
Governance	A No significant weaknesses identified; improvement recommendations raised in relation risk management, budget monitoring and review of key governance documents.	No risks of significant weakness identified.	A No significant weaknesses in arrangements identified; one improvement recommendation re-raised in relation to the review of key policy documents.
Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness	A No significant weaknesses identified; improvement recommendations raised in relation to performance and action plan reporting and data quality.	No risks of significant weakness identified.	A No significant weaknesses in arrangements identified; one improvement recommendation re-raised in relation to data quality.

- G** No significant weaknesses or improvement recommendations.
- A** No significant weaknesses, improvement recommendation(s) made.
- R** Significant weaknesses in arrangements identified and key recommendation(s) made.

Executive Summary

We set out below the key findings from our commentary on the Authority's arrangements in respect of value for money.



Financial sustainability

The Authority continues to demonstrate sound financial management, delivering a surplus of £370k in 2024/25 and setting a balanced budget for 2025/26. The refreshed MTFP is balanced without use of general reserves, supported by reasonable planning assumptions and quantified sensitivity analysis. Reserves remain at adequate levels, with £2.4m in general reserves and £1.8m in the budget contingency reserve at the end of 2024/25.

Delivery of efficiency savings was below target in 2024/25, though mitigated by unplanned vacancy savings. Oversight of savings has been strengthened through the establishment of a Productivity & Efficiency Board and improved reporting arrangements.

Financial plans are consistent with other strategic plans and reflect the Authority's partnership working arrangements.



Governance

The Authority has established robust governance arrangements, with clear structures and processes supporting effective decision-making, risk management, oversight of internal controls, financial sustainability and performance and standards of behaviour. Appropriate arrangements are in place to prevent and detect fraud.

The Authority's governance framework includes a suite of policies, protocols and other documents designed to enable effective decision-making, uphold appropriate standards and ensure compliance with legal and regulatory requirements. However, not all documents have been reviewed since their initial implementation to ensure they remain fit for purpose and we have reported an improvement recommendation on page 21.



Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness

The Authority has good arrangements for performance monitoring, with quarterly reports covering strategic objectives, service delivery, financial performance and progress against inspection action plans. Reporting supports effective scrutiny and decision-making, though a prior year recommendation to implement a data quality policy remains outstanding. Further details are provided on page 26.

Partnership working is embedded in governance and reporting structures and has been commended by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS). In the April 2025 inspection report, the Service was assessed as "good" in eight areas, a very positive outcome. Contract management is guided by a clear framework, and oversight arrangements are in place for major capital projects, ensuring transparency and accountability.

Executive summary – auditor’s other responsibilities

This page summarises our opinion on the Authority’s financial statements and sets out whether we have used any of the other powers available to us as the Authority’s auditors.

Auditor’s responsibility

2024/25 outcome

Opinion on the Financial Statements

We issued a disclaimed audit opinion on 19 February 2026. Our findings are set out in further detail on page 10.

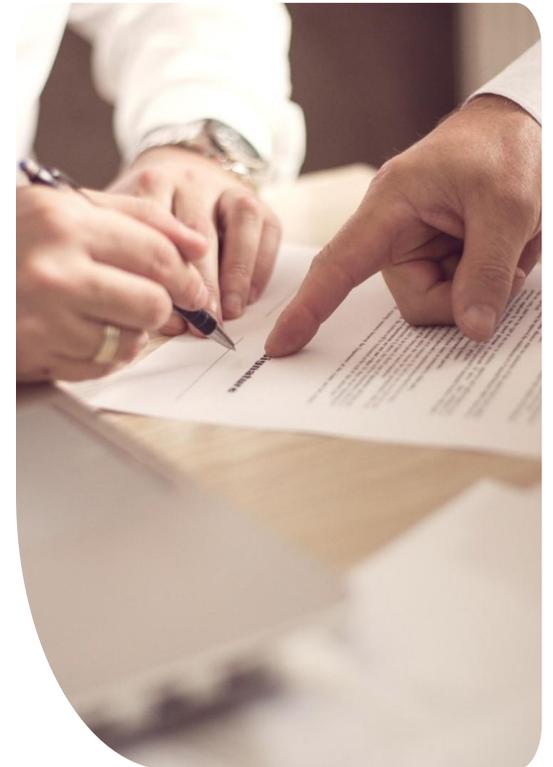
Use of auditor’s powers

We did not make any written statutory recommendations under Schedule 7 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014.

We did not make an application to the Court or issue any Advisory Notices under Section 28 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014.

We did not make an application for judicial review under Section 31 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014.

We did not identify any issues that required us to issue a Public Interest Report (PIR) under Schedule 7 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014.



03 Opinion on the financial statements and use of auditor's powers

Opinion on the financial statement

Audit opinion on the financial statements

We issued a disclaimed audit opinion on 19 February 2026. The audit opinion is disclaimed due to historical errors in opening balances for plant, property and equipment as well as the lack of assurance on other areas of opening balances such as reserves. This is owing to previously backstopped audits.

The full opinion will be published on the Authority's website.

Grant Thornton provides an independent opinion on whether the Authority's financial statements:

- give a true and fair view of the financial position of the Authority as at 31 March 2025 and of its expenditure and income for the year then ended
- have been properly prepared in accordance with the CIPFA/LASAAC Code of practice on local authority accounting in the United Kingdom 2024/25
- have been prepared in accordance with the requirements of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014.

These pages set out the key findings from our audit of the Authority's financial statements, and whether we have used any of the other powers available to us as the Authority's auditors.

We conducted our audit in accordance with: International Standards on Auditing (UK), the Code of Audit Practice (2024) published by the National Audit Office, and applicable law. We are independent of the Authority in accordance with applicable ethical requirements, including the Financial Reporting Council's Ethical Standard.

Findings from the audit of the financial statements

The Authority provided draft accounts in line with the national deadline of 30 June 2025. Draft financial statements were of a reasonable standard and supported by detailed working papers.

Our audit procedures noted a number of adjustments to the financial statements, and these are set out in our Audit Findings Report. All required adjustments have been made by management.

Audit Findings Report

We report the detailed findings from our audit in our Audit Findings Report. Our report will be presented to the Authority's Audit & Governance Committee on 20 October 2025, and a final version issued alongside our audit opinion in February 2026. Requests for this Audit Findings Report should be directed to the Authority.

Other reporting requirements

Annual Governance Statement

Under the Code of Audit Practice published by the National Audit Office we are required to consider whether the Annual Governance Statement does not comply with the requirements of the CIPFA/LASAAC Code of practice on local authority accounting in the United Kingdom 2024/25, or is misleading or inconsistent with the information of which we are aware from our audit.

We are not required to consider whether the Annual Governance Statement addresses all risks and controls or that risks are satisfactorily addressed by internal controls.

We have nothing to report in this regard.



04 Value for Money commentary on arrangements

Value for Money – commentary on arrangements

This page explains how we undertake the value for money assessment of arrangements and provide a commentary under three specified areas.

The Authority is the statutory governing authority responsible for overseeing fire and rescue services across Berkshire. Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (the Service) carries out day-to-day operations, whilst the Authority sets the strategic direction for the Service and is responsible for governance and oversight of the Service.

All Fire and Rescue Authorities are responsible for putting in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness from their resources. This includes taking properly informed decisions and managing key operational and financial risks so that they can deliver their objectives and safeguard public money. Fire and Rescue Authorities report on their arrangements, and the effectiveness of these arrangements, as part of their individual Annual Governance Statements.

Under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014, we are required to be satisfied whether the Authority has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. The National Audit Office (NAO) Code of Audit Practice ('the Code'), requires us to assess arrangements under three areas:



Financial sustainability

Arrangements for ensuring the Authority can continue to deliver services. This includes planning resources to ensure adequate finances and maintain sustainable levels of spending over the medium term (3-5 years).



Governance

Arrangements for ensuring that the Authority makes appropriate decisions in the right way. This includes arrangements for budget setting and budget management, risk management, and making decisions based on appropriate information.



Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness

Arrangements for improving the way the Authority delivers its services. This includes arrangements for understanding costs and delivering efficiencies and improving outcomes for service users.

Financial sustainability – commentary on arrangements

We considered how the Authority: **Commentary on arrangements:**

Rating

<p>identifies all the significant financial pressures that are relevant to its short and medium-term plans and builds these into them</p>	<p>The Authority delivered a surplus of £370k against its 2024/25 revenue budget and has set a balanced budget for 2025/26, alongside a refreshed Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) to 2028/29 which is balanced without any use of the general reserves. The 2024/25 surplus was driven by higher than budgeted income from investments and the settlement of a legal case, although these benefits were partially offset by higher than planned staff costs.</p> <p>Financial planning for 2025/26 and future years is underpinned by reasonable assumptions, although we note that assumptions relating to the 2025 pay awards were overly optimistic at 2%, compared to an agreed pay award of 3.2% for firefighters. The Authority has been able to mitigate this pressure by transferring £350k of the 2024/25 surplus to the budget contingency reserve. Sensitivity analysis is incorporated into financial planning and implications of changes in key assumptions is reported to Authority members.</p> <p>The Authority's financial position is supported by adequate reserves. At the end of 2024/25, the balance on the general reserve was £2.4m (5% of the net revenue budget) and the balance on the budget contingency reserve (used to manage short-term budget pressures and in-year variations) was £1.8m.</p>	<p>G</p>
---	--	----------

- G** No significant weaknesses or improvement recommendations.
- A** No significant weaknesses, improvement recommendations made.
- R** Significant weaknesses in arrangements identified and key recommendation(s) made.

Financial sustainability – commentary on arrangements (continued)

We considered how the Authority: **Commentary on arrangements:**

Rating

plans to bridge its funding gaps and identify achievable savings

The Authority achieved 65% of its planned efficiency savings in 2024/25, delivering £365k against a target of £565k. The shortfall was primarily due to delays in implementing changes to working practices intended to reduce overtime costs. Although the achievement of savings in 2024/25 was low, we have not raised an improvement recommendation because the operational changes relating to the savings schemes have now been implemented, and the associated savings have started to be realised. The underperformance against planned savings in 2024/25 was partially offset by unplanned savings arising from higher-than-anticipated vacancy levels.

The Authority's Efficiency & Productivity Plan, which outlines savings opportunities, is refreshed annually as part of the budget-setting process. To strengthen oversight, a Productivity & Efficiency Board was established at the start of 2024/25. The Board meets every six weeks to monitor delivery of savings projects, with particular focus on those rated red or amber. These projects are reviewed in detail, including status updates and mitigating actions, and reported to the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and Programme Board as appropriate.

The Authority has improved arrangements for reporting on achievement of savings, with the Q4 budget monitoring report for 2024/25 including an appendix setting out the Efficiency Plan Cashable Savings achieved for 2024/25.

G

- G** No significant weaknesses or improvement recommendations.
- A** No significant weaknesses, improvement recommendations made.
- R** Significant weaknesses in arrangements identified and key recommendation(s) made.

Financial sustainability – commentary on arrangements (continued)

We considered how the Authority: Commentary on arrangements:

Rating

<p>plans finances to support the sustainable delivery of services in accordance with strategic and statutory priorities</p>	<p>The Authority’s financial planning is strategically aligned with its Community Risk Management Plan 2023-27 (CRMP), Annual Plan, and supporting strategies such as the 10-year Strategic Asset Investment Framework (SAIF) and Sustainability Strategy 2024-29. The MTFP underpins delivery of strategic priorities, with targeted investment in areas including training, occupational health, and prevention and protection efficiency. The Authority has limited discretionary spend due to its statutory duties under the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 but has reviewed non-core incident types to better understand resource implications.</p>	<p>G</p>
<p>ensures its financial plan is consistent with other plans such as workforce, capital, investment and other operational planning which may include working with other local public bodies as part of a wider system</p>	<p>The Authority has established robust arrangements to ensure its financial planning is consistent with workforce, capital, investment, and operational strategies. This ensures coherence across service delivery and resource planning. Workforce implications are considered through the Workforce Planning Board, with financial impacts of staffing decisions such as recruitment, training, and operational support, reflected in the MTFP. Capital investment is guided by the 10-year SAIF with individual projects approved by Management Committee on a case-by-case basis. Oversight of capital delivery is provided by the Programme Board, Management Committee, and relevant working groups. Environmental sustainability is embedded within capital projects, and associated revenue impacts, such as financing costs and savings from energy efficiency, are incorporated into the MTFP.</p> <p>The Authority collaborates with other public bodies through the Thames Valley Fire Control Service (TVFCS), a joint operation with Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Services. Financial contributions and TVFCS performance are monitored and reported quarterly.</p>	<p>G</p>

- G** No significant weaknesses or improvement recommendations.
- A** No significant weaknesses, improvement recommendations made.
- R** Significant weaknesses in arrangements identified and key recommendation(s) made.

Financial sustainability – commentary on arrangements (continued)

We considered how the Authority: **Commentary on arrangements:**

Rating

<p>identifies and manages risk to financial resilience, e.g. unplanned changes in demand, including challenge of the assumptions in underlying plans</p>	<p>Risks to financial resilience are identified and reported through quarterly budget monitoring reports presented to the Management Committee. Reports highlight significant variances from the approved budget and outline mitigating actions.</p> <p>The MTFP includes quantified sensitivity analysis for key assumptions such as pay awards and supplier costs, demonstrating the Authority’s understanding of financial risks. For example, a 0.25% increase in pay awards would result in an additional £73k in annual costs. Financial planning assumptions are reviewed annually and adjusted to reflect emerging risks, including macroeconomic uncertainty and changes in government funding.</p> <p>To manage unforeseen financial pressures, the Authority maintains general reserves at 5% of annual revenue expenditure and holds a budget contingency reserve to support short-term budget shortfalls.</p>	<p>G</p>
--	--	----------

- G** No significant weaknesses or improvement recommendations.
- A** No significant weaknesses, improvement recommendations made.
- R** Significant weaknesses in arrangements identified and key recommendation(s) made.

Governance – commentary on arrangements

We considered how the Authority: **Commentary on arrangements:**

Rating

<p>monitors and assesses risk and how the Authority gains assurance over the effective operation of internal controls, including arrangements to prevent and detect fraud</p>	<p>The Authority has robust arrangements in place to identify and manage risks. Risks are assessed using a standard scoring matrix and monitored monthly by SLT. The Organisational Risk Management Policy outlines the Authority’s approach to risk, including escalation procedures, risk appetite, and alignment with strategic commitments. The Corporate Risk Register includes risk descriptions and inherent, current, and treated risk scores, and links risks to CRMP priorities as we have previously recommended. A summary risk register is reported quarterly to the Audit & Governance Committee.</p> <p>Internal Audit provides assurance over the internal control framework. Eight reviews were completed in 2024/25, with a planned Cyber Security review deferred to 2025/26. The Annual Internal Audit Report concluded that the Authority has an adequate and effective framework for risk management, governance and internal control, although noting that further enhancements would strengthen these arrangements. Progress against recommended management actions is tracked in quarterly performance reports.</p> <p>The Authority’s Compliments and Complaints Policy ensures complaints are investigated thoroughly and outcomes are logged to support organisational learning. Complaints are monitored and reported in quarterly updates reported to the Audit & Governance Committee. Arrangements for fraud prevention are supported by the Whistleblowing Policy and Anti-Fraud, Bribery & Corruption Policy as well as the RBFRS Development Programme and Member Development Programme.</p>	<p>G</p>
---	---	----------

- G** No significant weaknesses or improvement recommendations.
- A** No significant weaknesses, improvement recommendations made.
- R** Significant weaknesses in arrangements identified and key recommendation(s) made.

Governance – commentary on arrangements (continued)

We considered how the Authority: **Commentary on arrangements:**

Rating

<p>approaches and carries out its annual budget setting process</p>	<p>The Authority has a well-established annual budget setting process, overseen by the Budget Working Party. The process includes scrutiny of growth bids, savings plans and strategic investment proposals. These are incorporated into the base budget derived from prior year net revenue expenditure. Capital investment proposals are detailed in the 10-year SAIF, with funding for individual projects released following Management Committee approval of business cases.</p> <p>The process allows adequate time for consultation with budget holders, Authority Members and the public, including a formal consultation on the proposed precept before revenue and capital budgets are approved by the Fire Authority each year in February.</p>	<p>G</p>
<p>ensures effective processes and systems are in place to ensure budgetary control; to communicate relevant, accurate and timely management information; supports its statutory financial reporting; and ensures corrective action is taken where needed, including in relation to significant partnerships</p>	<p>The Management Committee receives quarterly budget monitoring reports that provide the year-to-date outturn and forecast year-end position against the revenue budget, along with analysis of projected under and over-spending and a high-level summary of key variances. Meeting minutes indicate that discussions are focused on the areas of greatest variance, demonstrating a clear understanding of issues requiring attention.</p> <p>Capital spending is reported alongside revenue. The Authority has strengthened its capital reporting by providing project-level forecasts for annual spend, comparing these to anticipated figures based on indicative values in the 10-year SAIF. Reports also include total forecasted project spend, approved project budgets, and commentary on project delivery.</p> <p>Budget monitoring reports include the revenue budget position for TVFCS and a Treasury Management update covering investment performance, debt position, and compliance with prudential indicators.</p>	<p>G</p>

- G** No significant weaknesses or improvement recommendations.
- A** No significant weaknesses, improvement recommendations made.
- R** Significant weaknesses in arrangements identified and key recommendation(s) made.

Governance – commentary on arrangements (continued)

We considered how the Authority: **Commentary on arrangements:**

Rating

<p>ensures it makes properly informed decisions, supported by appropriate evidence and allowing for challenge and transparency, including from audit committee</p>	<p>The Authority has arrangements in place to support informed and appropriate decision-making. The structure of the Fire Authority and its Committees is set out in the Terms of Reference, which provides principles and guidance to ensure decisions are transparent, evidence-based and subject to scrutiny and appropriate risk management. Reports presented to the Fire Authority and its Committees are sufficiently detailed to ensure transparency and enable effective challenge and debate. No evidence of inappropriate decision-making has been identified, and all meetings of the Fire Authority and Committees were quorate during 2024/25.</p>	<p>G</p>
<p>monitors and ensures appropriate standards, such as meeting legislative/regulatory requirements and standards in terms of staff and board member behaviour</p>	<p>Codes of Conduct for both Members and Officers outline expected standards of behaviour. The latest HMICFRS inspection report (April 2025) highlights a positive working culture, with staff empowered to challenge poor behaviours. Registers of interests are maintained, with member declarations published online and declarations a standing item at all meetings, although we found that the officer register for 2024/25 is yet to be published.</p> <p>The Authority’s Contract Standing Orders (CSO) were updated in February 2025 to reflect the requirements of the Procurement Act 2023. Waivers over £100k require Management Committee approval; use of waivers is monitored and reported to the Audit & Governance Committee in quarterly performance reports. In 2024/25, 91% of procurement spend was subject to competition, up from 86% the previous year.</p> <p>While some policies (e.g. the Anti-Fraud, Bribery and Corruption and Social Media policies) were reviewed and approved in 2024/25, we found that others, including the Gifts & Hospitality Protocol, had not been reviewed in the last five years. Officers have confirmed that an automated system is now in place to prompt timely policy reviews, but our prior year improvement recommendation remains open – see page 21.</p>	<p>A</p>

- G** No significant weaknesses or improvement recommendations.
- A** No significant weaknesses, improvement recommendations made.
- R** Significant weaknesses in arrangements identified and key recommendation(s) made.

Governance (continued)

Area for Improvement identified: review of key governance documents

Key Finding: The Authority's governance framework includes a suite of policies, protocols and other documents designed to enable effective decision-making, uphold appropriate standards and ensure compliance with legal and regulatory requirements. However, these documents have not been consistently reviewed since their initial implementation to ensure they remain fit for purpose.

Evidence: Our 2023/24 audit identified governance documents that had not been updated in over five years:

- Gifts and Hospitality Protocol for Members
- Social Media Policy
- Terms of Reference for the Workforce Planning Board

At the time of reporting, there was no evidence that the Gifts and Hospitality Protocol for Members had been reviewed by the Authority or an appropriate Committee since 2016, although we confirmed that the Social Media Policy had been reviewed in October 2024 and the Terms of Reference for the Workforce Planning Board were reviewed in May 2025.

Officers have confirmed that an automated system has been put in place to prompt timely policy reviews.

Impact: It is considered good practice for key governance documents to be reviewed at least every three to five years. Regular review helps ensure that policies remain relevant, reflect current legislation and organisational needs, and continue to support effective governance.

Improvement Recommendation 1

Governance documents that are overdue for review should be prioritised to ensure they remain current and fit for purpose. Following review, all governance documents – regardless of whether any changes are made – should be formally approved by the appropriate governance body (e.g. the Fire Authority, a Committee, or a designated Officer) to confirm their continued relevance and appropriateness.

Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness – commentary on arrangements

We considered how the Authority: **Commentary on arrangements:**

Rating

uses financial and performance information to assess performance to identify areas for improvement

The Authority has arrangements to use information to assess performance and identify areas for improvement. Quarterly performance reports to the Audit & Governance Committee track delivery against strategic objectives in the CRMP, performance against service provision and corporate health KPIs, progress towards Fire Standard implementation and implementation of the HMICFRS action plan. Performance reports also cover financial performance, capital projects, and progress against the People Strategy.

We reported an opportunity for improvement in our 2023/24 Auditors Annual Report, suggesting that that performance reports include more in-depth analysis where indicators show underperformance or deteriorating trends. Although this recommendation has not been implemented, we consider that the information provided to members is sufficient to support appropriate challenge and discussion. As such, we have not re-raised the previous recommendation. Overall, our review found that performance reports are sufficiently detailed to support challenge, discussion, and assurance.

Performance is monitored internally by the Senior Leadership Team and Strategic Performance Board. While the Authority recognises the importance of high-quality data, it has not yet implemented our 2023/24 recommendation to develop a data quality policy and formal framework and we have re-raised our prior year recommendation in this area – see page 26. Officers have confirmed that a new Data, Digital & Technology Strategy is in development to address this, and we will follow this up in our 2025/26 audit.

A

- G** No significant weaknesses or improvement recommendations.
- A** No significant weaknesses, improvement recommendations made.
- R** Significant weaknesses in arrangements identified and key recommendation(s) made.

Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness – commentary on arrangements (continued)

We considered how the Authority: **Commentary on arrangements:**

Rating

evaluates the services it provides to assess performance and identify areas for improvement

In its most recent HMICFRS inspection report (published April 2025), the Service was assessed as "good" in eight areas and "adequate" in three areas. Many of the twelve Areas for Improvement (AFIs) identified in the previous inspection (January 2023) have been addressed, with remaining actions reported as on track. In response to the five AFIs raised in the latest inspection, the Authority approved a new action plan in June 2025.

Progress against action plans is tracked by senior officers using a Power BI dashboard, reviewed by the Portfolio Board and RAG-rated to provide a high-level update via quarterly performance reports to the Audit & Governance Committee. The Authority has recently introduced clear guidelines to support consistent assessment of progress against the action plan.

In our 2023/24 AAR, we recommended enhancing the quarterly performance report with more detailed commentary on HMICFRS action plan delivery. While this has not been implemented, we consider the current RAG-rating approach sufficient to support challenge and scrutiny. We have therefore closed the recommendation. We have suggested it would be good practice to include a summary of progress against actions arising from HMICFRS thematic reviews, such as the 2024 report on *Standards of Behaviour: The Handling of Misconduct in Fire and Rescue Services* alongside the HMICFRS action plan progress summary.

G

- G** No significant weaknesses or improvement recommendations.
- A** No significant weaknesses, improvement recommendations made.
- R** Significant weaknesses in arrangements identified and key recommendation(s) made.

Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness – commentary on arrangements (continued)

We considered how the Authority: **Commentary on arrangements:**

Rating

ensure they deliver their role within significant partnerships and engages with stakeholders they have identified, in order to assess whether they are meeting their objectives

The Authority consulted with the public, staff, and stakeholders in developing the CRMP 2023–27, which includes collaboration and partnership working as a core theme. Formal partnerships, such as the Thames Valley Emergency Services Collaboration Programme (TVESCP) and TVFCS, support the achievement of CRMP priorities and are reflected in governance and reporting structures.

The work of partnerships is fed back through the Authority's governance and delivery structures. For example, the Authority maintains a Community Engagement Register to record community and stakeholder engagement relationships. In relation to TVFCS, a summary of financial and operational performance is incorporated into the Authority's performance reporting framework, and the Fire Authority receives an annual report from the Chairman of the TVFCS Joint Committee setting out performance information in more detail. Authority members are represented within the governance structures of both the TVESCP and TVFCS. An annual update on collaboration activities is presented to the Fire Authority by the Lead Member for Collaboration.

The 2023 HMICFRS inspection report identified the Authority's approach to public consultation as an area of innovative practice, whilst the 2025 report commended the Authority's comprehensive monitoring and evaluation of collaborative outcomes.

G

- G** No significant weaknesses or improvement recommendations.
- A** No significant weaknesses, improvement recommendations made.
- R** Significant weaknesses in arrangements identified and key recommendation(s) made.

Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness – commentary on arrangements (continued)

We considered how the Authority: **Commentary on arrangements:**

Rating

<p>commissions or procures services, assessing whether it is realising the expected benefits</p>	<p>The Authority’s Contract Standing Orders were updated in February 2025 to reflect the requirements of the Procurement Act 2023. Contract Standing Orders are supported by a Contract Management Framework that defines roles for procurement and contract managers and classifies contracts by value and risk (platinum to bronze) to focus management on higher-risk, higher-value contracts. There is evidence of active contract management for significant contracts, including regular meetings and monitoring of standards and key performance indicators. Audit insights in relation to contract management are provided on page 27.</p> <p>The Authority recognises the importance of securing value for money in procurement and has identified opportunities for savings generated through procurement and contract management for inclusion in the MTFP.</p> <p>Oversight of major capital projects, such as the Learning and Development Centre (completed July 2025), is provided by the Estates Development & Sustainability Working Group (chaired by the Lead Member for Strategic Assets & Sustainability) and the Audit & Governance Committee, ensuring appropriate scrutiny and governance.</p>	<p>G</p>
--	--	----------

- G** No significant weaknesses or improvement recommendations.
- A** No significant weaknesses, improvement recommendations made.
- R** Significant weaknesses in arrangements identified and key recommendation(s) made.

Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness – commentary on arrangements (continued)

Area for Improvement identified: data quality

Key Finding: Performance reporting relies on data sourced from multiple systems and departments, each governed by varying data quality standards and procedures. However, the Authority does not currently have a formal data quality framework or policy in place to ensure consistency and reliability across all data sources.

Evidence: Our 2023/24 audit found that while some data quality procedures are in place, there is no overarching framework or policy guiding data management practices. At the time of reporting, a Data, Digital & Technology Strategy was under development, which is expected to incorporate data quality principles aligned with the Fire Standard for Data Management.

Impact: The absence of a formal data quality framework reduces assurance over the accuracy and reliability of data used for performance monitoring and decision-making. Establishing such a framework would strengthen governance, support informed decision-making, and improve confidence in reported outcomes.

Improvement Recommendation 2

The Authority should finalise and formally approve the draft Data, Digital & Technology Strategy, ensuring it aligns with the Fire Standard for Data Management. A review schedule should be established, and training provided to members and officers where necessary to support effective implementation.



Grant Thornton insights – learning from others

The Authority has the arrangements we would expect to see in respect of procurement and contract management, but could challenge itself to go further, based on the best arrangements we see across the sector



What the Authority is already doing:

- The Authority has a clear scheme of delegation in place for approval of new contracts and all initial procurements are monitored and recorded centrally in a contracts register which includes named contract managers.
- There is a clear framework in place to support effective contract management and evidence of active contract management for high-value and high-risk contracts assessed as platinum and gold, including regular meetings and performance monitoring.



Our national report on procurement and contract management sets out lessons learned from our VfM audits. Key findings include:

- Align contracts with priorities and the procurement strategy and include relevant performance indicators so that the corporate plan and procurement strategy can be measured and monitored.
- Maintain high level controls over the whole life of a contract, including supplier health checks and internal management resilience checks.
- Consider how contract management arrangements can protect against and identify potential fraud.



The Authority could consider:

- Enhancing assurance by introducing central oversight of contract management activity, ensuring that platinum and gold contracts are consistently managed in line with the framework.

05 Summary of Value for Money Recommendations raised in 2024/25

Improvement recommendations raised in 2024/25

	Recommendation	Relates to	Management Actions
IR1	Governance documents that are overdue for review should be prioritised to ensure they remain current and fit for purpose. Following review, all governance documents – regardless of whether any changes are made – should be formally approved by the appropriate governance body (e.g. the Fire Authority, a Committee, or a designated Officer) to confirm their continued relevance and appropriateness.	Governance (page 21)	<p>Actions: Run internal audit of all control documents and follow through with owners.</p> <p>Responsible Officer: Head of Business Information and Systems</p> <p>Due Date: 11 November 2025</p>
IR2	The Authority should finalise and formally approve the draft Data, Digital & Technology Strategy, ensuring it aligns with the Fire Standard for Data Management. A review schedule should be established, and training provided to members and officers where necessary to support effective implementation.	Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness (page 26)	<p>Actions: Approve strategy and roll out training</p> <p>Responsible Officer: Head of Business Information and Systems</p> <p>Due Date: 10 February 2026</p>

07 Appendices

Appendix A: Responsibilities of the Authority

Public bodies spending taxpayers' money are accountable for their stewardship of the resources entrusted to them. They should account properly for their use of resources and manage themselves well so that the public can be confident.

Financial statements are the main way in which local public bodies account for how they use their resources. Local public bodies are required to prepare and publish financial statements setting out their financial performance for the year. To do this, bodies need to maintain proper accounting records and ensure they have effective systems of internal control.

All local public bodies are responsible for putting in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness from their resources. This includes taking properly informed decisions and managing key operational and financial risks so that they can deliver their objectives and safeguard public money. Local public bodies report on their arrangements, and the effectiveness with which the arrangements are operating, as part of their annual governance statement.

The Chief Financial Officer (or equivalent) is responsible for the preparation of the financial statements and for being satisfied that they give a true and fair view, and for such internal control as the Chief Financial Officer (or equivalent) determines is necessary to enable the preparation of financial statements that are free from material misstatement, whether due to fraud or error.

The Chief Financial Officer (or equivalent) is required to prepare the financial statements in accordance with proper practices as set out in the CIPFA/LASAAC Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom. In preparing the financial statements, the Chief Financial Officer (or equivalent) is responsible for assessing the Authority's ability to continue as a going concern and use the going concern basis of accounting unless there is an intention by government that the services provided by the Authority will no longer be provided.

The Authority is responsible for putting in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in their use of resources, to ensure proper stewardship and governance, and to review regularly the adequacy and effectiveness of these arrangements.



Appendix B: Value for Money Auditor responsibilities

Our work is risk-based and focused on providing a commentary assessment of the Authority’s Value for Money arrangements

Phase 1 – Planning and initial risk assessment

As part of our planning, we assess our knowledge of the Authority’s arrangements and whether we consider there are any indications of risks of significant weakness. This is done against each of the reporting criteria and continues throughout the reporting period.

Phase 2 – Additional risk-based procedures and evaluation

Where we identify risks of significant weakness in arrangements, we will undertake further work to understand whether there are significant weaknesses. We use auditor’s professional judgement in assessing whether there is a significant weakness in arrangements and ensure that we consider any further guidance issued by the NAO.

Phase 3 – Reporting our commentary and recommendations

The Code requires us to provide a commentary on your arrangements which is detailed within this report. Where we identify weaknesses in arrangements we raise recommendations.



A range of different recommendations can be raised by the auditors as follows:

Statutory recommendations – recommendations to the Authority under Section 24 (Schedule 7) of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014.

Key recommendations – the actions which should be taken by the Authority where significant weaknesses are identified within arrangements.

Improvement recommendations – actions which are not a result of us identifying significant weaknesses in the Authority’s arrangements, but which if not addressed could increase the risk of a significant weakness in the future.

Information that informs our ongoing risk assessment

Cumulative knowledge of arrangements from the prior year	Key performance and risk management information reported to Senior Officers and the Authority
Interviews and discussions with key stakeholders	External review such as by CIPFA
Progress with implementing recommendations	Regulatory inspections such as from HMICFRS
Findings from our opinion audit	Annual Governance Statement including the Head of Internal Audit annual opinion

Appendix C: Follow up of 2023/24 improvement recommendations

	Prior Recommendation	Raised	Progress	Current position	Further action
IR1	<p>The Authority should include reporting specifically on efficiency savings achieved as compared to the approved plan, within the quarterly financial update.</p> <p>The Authority should continue development of its savings plans to identify new sources of savings required to balance the MTFP beyond 2024/25.</p>	2023/24	The Q4 2024/25 budget monitoring report included a comparison of planned versus achieved cashable savings.	Implemented	No further action required.
IR2	Sensitivity analysis should be updated throughout the development of the budget and MTFP, and reports to the Budget Working Party, Authority and Committees should include relevant details.	2023/24	The MTFP presented to the Fire Authority in February 2025 included scenario analysis quantifying the impact of varying assumptions on pay awards and employer national insurance contributions.	Implemented	No further action required.
IR3	The Authority should consider mapping risks recorded in the Corporate Risk Register to the strategic priorities set out in the Community Risk Management Plan.	2023/24	The Corporate Risk Register, reviewed by the Senior Leadership Team, includes references to strategic commitments outlined in the CRMP. A summarised version is presented to the Audit & Governance Committee.	Implemented	No further action required.

Appendix C: Follow up of 2023/24 improvement recommendations

	Prior Recommendation	Raised	Progress	Current position	Further action
IR4	We recommend that the Authority consider expanding the quarterly financial update to the Management Committee to include details of planned capital spending for the year and year to date.	2023/24	The Q4 2024/25 capital monitoring report included a comparison of annual budget (based on indicative project values set out in the SAIF) and annual expenditure for capital projects.	Implemented	No further action required.
IR5	<p>The Authority should ensure there is a clear policy for the review of key governance documents.</p> <p>The Authority should conduct a comprehensive review of policies and procedures to identify documents in need of review. Following review, policies and procedures should be approved by the Authority or appropriate Committee, even where no changes have been made.</p>	2023/24	<p>We found that the Social Media Policy had been reviewed in October 2024 and the Terms of Reference for the Workforce Planning Board were reviewed in May 2025.</p> <p>However, there was no evidence that the Gifts and Hospitality Protocol for Members had been reviewed by the Authority or an appropriate Committee since 2016.</p> <p>Officers have confirmed that an automated system has been put in place to prompt timely policy reviews.</p>	Partially implemented	Improvement recommendation re-raised – see pages 21 and 29.

Appendix C: Follow up of 2023/24 improvement recommendations

	Prior Recommendation	Raised	Progress	Current position	Further action
IR6	The Authority should ensure that where performance measures indicate areas of underperformance or deteriorating performance, performance reports include analysis of reasons for underperformance and actions being taken to address underperformance.	2023/24	We consider that the performance information provided to Authority members is sufficient to support appropriate challenge and discussion. As such, we have not re-raised the previous recommendation. Overall, our review found that performance reports are sufficiently detailed to support challenge, discussion, and assurance.	Closed – not implemented	No further action required.
IR7	The Authority should develop a data quality policy and implement a formalised data quality framework.	2023/24	A Data, Digital & Technology Strategy is currently in development. The Strategy is expected to incorporate data quality principles aligned with the Fire Standard for Data Management.	Not implemented	Improvement recommendation re-raised – see pages 26 and 29.

Appendix C: Follow up of 2023/24 improvement recommendations

	Prior Recommendation	Raised	Progress	Current position	Further action
IR8	<p>Reporting relating to the HMICFRS action plan and progress updates provided in the quarterly performance report could be improved by including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a timeline for the completion of each action - designated owner for each action - details of issues and mitigations for actions rated amber (issues with the project but these are being managed) - actions relating to HMICFRS thematic reports 	2023/24	<p>Progress against HMICFS action plans is tracked by senior Officers using a Power BI dashboard and is reviewed by the Portfolio Board.</p> <p>We consider that the current RAG-rating approach to reporting progress against action plans for the Audit & Governance Committee sufficient to support challenge and scrutiny.</p>	Closed – not implemented	No further action required.



© 2025 Grant Thornton UK LLP. All rights reserved.

'Grant Thornton' refers to the brand under which the Grant Thornton member firms provide assurance, tax and advisory services to their clients and/or refers to one or more member firms, as the context requires. Grant Thornton UK LLP is a member firm of Grant Thornton International Ltd (GTIL). GTIL and the member firms are not a worldwide partnership. GTIL and each member firm is a separate legal entity. Services are delivered by the member firms. GTIL does not provide services to clients. GTIL and its member firms are not agents of, and do not obligate, one another and are not liable for one another's acts or omissions.