

News release

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Scottish Fire and Rescue Service takes "cautious approach" to reform

Turning the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) into a more flexible, modern service has been steady but slow, says the Auditor General.

Caroline Gardner's report says real progress has been made with integrating the eight former services into a single body.

The SFRS is now in a good position to complete the process following a deal agreed in April 2018 to harmonise firefighters pay and conditions.

Ambitious plans to modernise and transform the service, meanwhile, have been affected by:

- A cautious approach taken by the SFRS to secure political, staff, trades unions' and public backing for its vision;
- The need for sufficient funding to begin implementing change;
- Limited availability of senior officers to lead transformation projects.

Modernisation is needed to reflect the different risks faced by Scotland's population since the regional fire services were set up in the late 1940s.

The SFRS's running costs are around 12 per cent lower (£266m) than when the services merged five years ago. It has also demonstrated strong financial management and board governance.

But the single service has inherited a capital backlog of £389 million needed to maintain and invest in its property, vehicles and equipment.

This backlog, says the report, is insurmountable without a transformation of the service's current delivery model plus additional investment.

Ms Gardner said: "The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has an ambitious vision that involves significant changes to make it a more flexible, modern service.

"It has been working towards this for some time and has taken a cautious and measured approach due to a range of contributing factors.

"It now needs to press ahead with transformation so that it can respond to the changing needs of the public and can address its increasingly unsustainable model of delivery.

"This will take time to achieve and will mean difficult decisions about how the SFRS deploys its people and resources."

For further information contact Patrick McFall Tel: 0131 625 1663 / 07786660171 or pmcfall@audit-scotland.gov.uk / media@audit-scotland.gov.uk

Notes to editors:

1. The SFRS started work on 1 April 2013. It replaced the eight former fire and rescue services and the Scottish Fire Services College. In its first year, SFRS employed around 8,500 people and had a revenue budget of £272.7 million. The service now employs around 7,800, including 3645 wholetime fire fighters.

2. The revenue budget for 2018/19 is £264.4 million, with a capital budget of £32.5 million. There is a capital investment backlog of £389 million.

3. In 2016/17, false alarms due to equipment were responsible for 43.5 per cent of all incidents. The majority (68 per cent) of false alarms due to equipment are a result of fire alarm systems in non-domestic buildings (such as schools, hospitals and offices).

4. Audit Scotland has prepared this report for the Auditor General for Scotland. All Audit Scotland reports published since 2000 are available at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk

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