



Strategic Workforce Plan 2026-28

1. Introduction

The strategic workforce plan is intended to support the delivery of our Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP), core organisational strategies and People Strategy, to ensure we have the right people with the right skills in place to deliver the best possible service to our communities. The Workforce Plan is in alignment with National Operational Guidance which states that 'Workforce planning is the process of balancing your workforce resource against your workforce needs so that you have enough skilled employees to meet demand. It includes analysing your current workforce, deciding on your workforce needs for the future, identifying any gaps between now and the future, and then deciding how you are going to approach this gap'.

The plan sets out the needs of the Service in relation to its predicted people and skills requirements for the next two years. It outlines our current workforce position, recognising challenges and opportunities, and enables us to identify and deploy the necessary interventions to assist and support planning, reflecting the principles of the Service's Workforce Planning policy.

The action plan in Appendix A is a starting point in ensuring we have the required workforce to achieve our strategic priorities. The plan will be refreshed on an annual basis as actions are fulfilled and new actions developed. Delivery of the actions contained within will be overseen by the Strategic Workforce Planning Group (SWPG) which meets on a quarterly basis.

The intention is to provide clear workforce planning information for the SWPG so key workforce related decisions can be made relating to promotion boards, recruitment processes, targeted positive action and workforce development. It must also take information and guidance for those decisions from the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP).

By anticipating the needs of the Service through the business planning process, the Service can ensure the foundations are in place to deliver Service objectives and can be factored into the budget planning process.

2. Aims

The workforce plan aims to:

- Maintain required establishment levels in our workforce;
- Consider the potential cost and any capacity impacts via effective and efficient workforce and vacancy management;
- Mitigate risks posed by single points of knowledge, particularly in specialist roles and succession plan effectively;
- Consider the level of skills and qualifications needed to meet legislative requirements in areas such as Protection;
- Consider taking proportionate action to recruit and retain people from all backgrounds, while taking into consideration the duty to appoint on merit;
- Create an improved ability to respond to changing sector contexts;
- Plan for workforce development with organisational design and development;
- Reduce inefficiency with improved job design;
- Improve productivity and quality of service;
- Create effective plans to identify future leaders.

3. Methodology

Through the development of this plan, the following approach has been adopted, as outlined in the Service’s Workforce Planning policy:

- Assess the current workforce
- Assess future workforce requirements
- Develop an action plan to fill the gaps between present and future

The development of this workforce plan has been based around engagement with strategic leaders and the HR team to identify the strategic drivers for change, challenges and risks to stabilising and retaining the existing workforce, as well as any workforce changes expected in the future and actions required.

4. Workforce drivers

Common workforce drivers for the Service have been themed below:

Drivers	Challenges/Risks
Embedding the workforce planning cycle into business planning	Attraction and Recruitment
Defining key data metrics and associated outcomes	Retention –turnover / staff progressing in career
Embracing opportunities in new technology and digital communications	Local succession planning and workforce planning
Changing demographics, both workforce and local population	Age profile of workforce
Increasing the future workforce pipeline/grow our own	Work/life balance
Alternative roles in areas experiencing long term vacancies	Career entry pathways / apprenticeships
	Understanding of career pathways and tools to support learning and development, and transition between roles
	Financially constrained environment / management of fixed term posts
	Some reliance on agency workers
	Impacts of pension scheme changes to retirement decisions

The strategic context in which this workforce plan is set considers the following external and internal factors:

External

- National Firefighter Pension changes and remedies (retirement trends)
- National Fire Chiefs Councils' position statements and good practice
- Protection capability and building safety legislation, post-Grenfell reforms)
- Emergency Response Driving (legislative requirements)
- National culture reform programme/s
- Changing nature of incidents (increased flooding, wildfires, complex built environments)

Internal

- Attrition levels resulting in loss of critical skills and knowledge
- Planning and responding to uncertain financial challenges and budget constraints
- Attracting and retaining specialist skills
- Investment in developing and upskilling our workforce
- Succession planning for operational and support roles

5. Labour market summary

The UK labour market continues to cool in a controlled manner, reflecting broader economic headwinds and structural challenges. The post-pandemic tightness of the labour market has eased significantly. A labour market overview from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) reveals vacancy numbers remained broadly unchanged in August to October 2025. Early estimates show a small increase of just 2,000 (0.2%) vacancies to 723,000. Until this quarter, the total number of vacancies had declined for 39 consecutive quarters, since its peak of 1.3 million in March to May 2022.

In terms of the local data in Herefordshire and Worcestershire, the West Midlands labour market is under pressure from rising costs, slowing growth, and persistent skills shortages. While employment remains relatively high (73%), unemployment has climbed to one of the highest rates in England (5.8%), and economic inactivity remains a concern (21.9%).

The significant proportion of West Midlands residents leaving the workforce over the past year places further pressure on a tight labour market. In an economic survey conducted by Herefordshire and Worcestershire Chamber of Commerce (2025), 50% of businesses attempted to recruit staff over the last quarter and 28% of businesses had experienced recruitment difficulties. There were also a number of comments from businesses reporting that professional/managerial roles were the most difficult to recruit for.

6. Financial context

The Service is required to operate within the resources it has available to it and on a financially sustainable basis. The Service has set a balanced budget for financial year 2025/26 and is currently developing longer term finance planning. It is important that the strategic priorities and objectives of the Service align with its budget. Workforce planning must balance operational capability with affordability, requiring accurate establishment control and workforce modelling.

7. Approved budget

The Service faces ongoing financial pressures following £1.2m of savings delivered in 2025/26, which included approximately 20 post reductions but no impact on frontline Response, Protection or Prevention functions.

A further funding reduction of around £1.2m is projected over the period 2026/27 to 2028/29 based on the latest government grant settlement. Although previous lobbying secured a funding 'floor' that prevented deeper cuts, the final outcome of the government's consultation remains unknown, and the Service is planning on a worst-case basis until confirmed.

Additional financial risks include potential inflationary pressures, national pay awards above the budgeted 2%, and uncertainties around business rates and specific grants. Combined, these factors could increase the required savings to approximately £1.8m across the next three years.

Financial planning assumptions rely on the Fire Authority taking the maximum £5 Council Tax increase annually; this is factored into current forecasts but does not resolve the funding gap. Failure to take the annual increase would worsen the position further.

At present, no decisions have been made regarding further workforce reductions or changes to frontline services. However, depending on the scale of confirmed funding cuts, additional service redesign or workforce impact may be required. Once funding levels are clarified, options will be developed for the Fire Authority, with full consultation with trade unions and transparent communication with staff.

Despite these challenges, the Service will continue to operate with an annual budget of around £46m and remains committed to maintaining high-quality services to the community.

8. Workforce at a glance

Key themes arising from our workforce profile:

- 9.9% of operational staff are women; compared to 9.7% nationally.
- 5.4% of operational staff belong to an ethnic minority group (including white minority groups) / compared to 10.2% within our local communities (2021 census data).
- 2.4% of operational staff are from an ethnic minority / compared to 5.4% nationally.
- 34.2% of women are in a managerial role.

A supply and demand analysis is undertaken prior to each quarterly Workforce Planning meeting to consider up to date data and intel.

9. Strategic workforce risks

The strategic workforce risks impacting on our current and future workforce are as follows:

Risks	
Operational establishment and skills	<p>The Service's establishment will continue to be volatile for at least the next two years as changes to the national Firefighter Pensions Scheme (FPS) are likely to result in unpredictable levels of attrition from the operational response workforce group. This may bring a loss of operational knowledge and experience and will continue to be a challenge for the Service. It is predicted a number (between 3 – 5%) of our experienced operational commanders may leave the Service through retirements over the two years, with 4 known leavers between now and the end of March 2028.</p> <p>The Service has committed to maintain its operational establishment of Wholetime Firefighters to ensure operational resilience and this has required a further recruitment campaign, recently completed in 2025. On-Call recruitment is currently undertaken on an ongoing basis due to challenges in attraction and retention. Additionally, there are pressures which are as a result of career progression through the Service as we seek to promote behind our Senior and Middle Manager vacancies.</p> <p>Furthermore, depending on the direction of the Pensions remedy, some Officers may leave before our modelling assumes. Moving forward, our ability to predict operational retirements significantly reduces. In addition, with societal changes in employment behaviour, like other sectors, we are likely to have a more transient workforce which we need to be prepared for.</p> <p>The Service may lose skills and experience which needs to be planned for and addressed particularly in the areas of Officer skills, Driving and Incident Command.</p> <p>The lead time to acquire skills and qualifications is generally increasing, the Service is seeing more requirements for pre-course and post-course learning whether this be reading, reflection or completing work in advance. This time needs to be factored on top of the course input itself.</p>
Corporate skills	<p>Although changes will also apply to the Local Government Pensions Scheme (LGPS), the numbers affected are not currently of concern.</p> <p>The Service at times experiences difficulties in recruiting to some key corporate professionally skilled/qualified roles. This has been the case in ICT and Finance. We may need to consider building in lead and hand over time on occasion to facilitate succession planning and knowledge transfer which will have some financial implications.</p>
Role of PCCs and Governance models	<p>There still remains some uncertainty for the FRS nationally, combined with the number of major national and local initiatives. There are several key consultations ongoing which could impact significantly over the next 3 years around governance, inspection,</p>

	<p>and performance. Changes in Government direction and also at a more local level will potentially have an impact on how the FRS moves forward, and what decisions are made locally.</p> <p>The review of the Police and Crime Commissioner role and associated governance models may have the potential to impact on our corporate workforce and we must continue to be sighted on national and local thinking as far as possible.</p>
<p>Protection capability</p>	<p>The need for a skilled Protection capability within FRSs is clear and a requirement in the delivery of HWFRS' statutory function. The importance of this has been seen in the aftermath of national events (specifically Grenfell) and is accordingly recognised in subsequent reviews.</p> <p>HWFRS is committed to maintaining a strong Protection function by increasing the Protection knowledge and skills of operational personnel; and developing and expanding the skills and capacities of the specialist Protection team.</p> <p>This investment is supported by Central Government funding and NFCC direction. It should be highlighted that the lead time for achieving the relevant qualifications is a minimum of 2 years plus application of skills and ongoing CPD.</p>
<p>Attracting specialist skills and representation in all roles</p>	<p>Nationally, high potential and direct entry schemes are very topical. Attracting and evaluating individuals with aspiration, ability and engagement is a challenge, but the benefits of such schemes could help HWFRS to improve its diversity of thought and delivery as well as representation.</p> <p>The appetite to adopt such approaches is an area for further exploration within HWFRS, therefore, we will explore high potential schemes with key senior stakeholders as appropriate.</p> <p>HR and Response continue to work together on inclusive recruitment campaigns, leading to measurable progress in diversifying our workforce demographics. While these efforts have delivered positive results, work must continue to attract people from all backgrounds to the organisation.</p> <p>Where single areas of competence/skill exist, we will seek to recruit behind to give a level of succession planning. This is particularly relevant in areas such as Finance and ICT.</p> <p>Given the projected retirement profile, we will need to strengthen efforts to enhance development opportunities for our current staff via the Step Framework.</p> <p>We will also continue to work with our internal staff networks, and external partners, such as Women in the Fire Service and AFSA, to promote seminars and workshops for our current staff. We will learn from our data, analysis and feedback so that we can effectively recruit to specialist roles in the corporate areas of the organisation.</p>

We will continue to use effective workforce planning to ensure that we achieve the objectives set out in the Service's CRMP and core strategies.

We will continue to explore new and innovative ways of working both internally and with external partners to deliver our service to the community. The suggested key workforce planning priorities for the Service for the forthcoming two years should be:

- Succession planning and bridging the skills gaps
- Managing, supporting, and delivering culture change
- Diversity in our workforce
- Workforce analysis
- National initiatives
- Developing Leadership and people management capability

Monitoring and updating of the plan

The production of an annual plan designed to determine the Service's forthcoming staffing shortfalls should be integrated into the work programme for the Strategic Workforce Planning Group and Business Planning Board. The workforce plan supplements the People Strategy.

Strategic Workforce Action Plan 2026-2028

Priority	Objective	Current position	Actions	Timescale	Narrative
Recruitment	Monitor attrition at Wholetime FF level to determine recruitment needs	2025 WT FF campaign concluded in October 2025 – no plans to recruit Wholetime again during 26/27. New WT FF intake in January 2026.	Monitor levels of leavers and retirements	Duration of Workforce plan	Reassess financial position as appropriate and in line with MTFP.
	Monitor attrition at On-Call FF level to determine recruitment needs	Currently monitored – On-Call Marketing and Recruitment Team delivery Strategic leader and practitioner are involved with the On-Call NFCC workstream to improve attraction and recruitment of staff increasing availability and succession planning	On-call Marketing & Recruitment team.	Duration of Workforce plan	Evolve recruitment approach as part of team outputs
Succession Planning	Ensure all WC's and CC's have achieved Level 3 Certificate in Fire Safety	Supervisory Managers on all 30 watches are at various stages of their training.	Qualification progression being monitored. Courses will also be made available to Firefighters seeking development.	Ongoing	Training for new supervisory managers to be factored into future budgets.

Priority	Objective	Current position	Actions	Timescale	Narrative
	Develop all FDS Officers' Fire Safety specialisms	Complete with 8 FDS Officers qualified to L4 Diploma or above	Fire Safety now recognised as an Officer specialism ensuring skills will be replaced should staff leave. Other qualified Officers available and being trained	On-going	As above
	Addressing incident command skills gaps	Maintain appropriate number of Level 1 Commanders	4 L1 IC courses per year planned	A L1 IC Course is 5 days in length plus a 2 hour assessment, max. numbers per course are 10.	IC courses-there is an amount of pre course work each delegate must undertake prior to attending the course.
	Maintaining Drivers (ERD)	Maintain appropriate number of ERDs	80 Driving courses per year planned	To gain ERD status a driver must complete a 1 week LGV course then gain sufficient experience before completing a 10 day ERD course	Changes to driving standards requires different delivery models and longer course duration ERD courses include driving in the hours of darkness
	Specialist Officer skills	Maintain skills in scope include FI, NILO, HAZMAT	Plan in courses to address as part of SC and GC development programmes	In line with Training Planner and as need arises	
	Supervisory Leadership Development Programme	New development programme launched in September 2025.	Progress initial cohorts through the self-guided programme.	First cohort completions expected in Q2 2026/27	Programme has started and delegates are being supported by Development Team and Line Managers.

Priority	Objective	Current position	Actions	Timescale	Narrative
	Middle Leadership Programme	New programme to be launched in 2026.	Kick-off initial cohort	Q4 2025/26	
Supporting and delivering culture change	Continue to invest in corporate skills development such as equality and inclusion, project management, financial awareness, and political awareness, having difficult conversations /giving feedback, interviewing, managing and supporting mental health.	Bespoke organisational EDI learning programme in place.	Continue investment in appropriate development for staff including support for Personal Development.	Duration of workforce plan	
Data and feedback	Improve the feedback and number of exit interviews carried out to better understand how to improve attraction and retention.	Exit interview completion rates are low. Improving quantity and quality of data is a People Strategy objective for 2026/27.	Increase % or target number once HR notified of leaver.	2026/27	Exit questionnaire in draft.
	Undertake analysis to understand trends, risks and opportunities for future workforce planning	Supply and demand analysis undertaken on a quarterly basis.	Continue to evolve content in consideration of external and internal factors.	Duration of workforce plan.	
National approaches (NFCC)	Coaching and mentoring, 360 feedback	Informal coaching and mentoring in place. NFCC has	Introduce a coaching framework/approach across the organisation.		

Priority	Objective	Current position	Actions	Timescale	Narrative
		<p>launched Coaching hub.</p> <p>Executive coaching available as part of Aspiring Executive Leaders programme</p>	<p>360 feedback process for Exec Board</p> <p>360 feedback process for other leadership levels</p> <p>Undertake clear communications to the wider organisation on the commitment to this approach</p>		



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FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE



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