

Inspection of Staffordshire Commissioner Fire and Rescue Authority

Inspection dates:

24 to 26 May 2022

Overall effectiveness**Good**

The quality of education

Good

Behaviour and attitudes

Outstanding

Personal development

Outstanding

Leadership and management

Good

Apprenticeships

Good

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Not previously inspected

Information about this provider

The Staffordshire Commissioner assumed responsibility for the Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service in August 2018, taking over the statutory duties of the former Fire and Rescue Authority. The Fire and Rescue Service is led by a chief fire officer who directly reports to the commissioner. The Fire and Rescue Service became a levy-funded apprenticeship provider in January 2018. At the time of the inspection, the service had recruited a total of 37 firefighting apprentices. All of these are enrolled on a level 3 standards-based apprenticeship in operational firefighter.

All apprentices undertake a 15-week basic firefighting course provided at the fire and rescue services headquarters before being deployed to an operational watch crew at one of 33 community fire stations spread across the county.

The service covers a county which is 2,713 square kilometres in size. It is diverse in terms of its geography and is made up of the cities of Stoke-on-Trent and Lichfield – and the major towns of Stafford, Burton upon Trent, Cannock, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Tamworth and Leek.

What is it like to be a learner with this provider?

Senior leaders and managers have high expectations of apprentices. They ensure that apprentices benefit from access to thorough and detailed training that enables them to demonstrate routinely their operational capability to be deployed as firefighters.

Apprentices are enthusiastic about their training and enjoy undertaking a wide variety of practical and theoretical sessions. Each of these builds on previous learning to increase their confidence in dealing with a wide variety of real fire and rescue situations.

Training instructors and watch managers ensure that apprentices review and repeat essential firefighting techniques so that they understand and act in a manner that is safe to themselves and others. As a result, apprentices trust their knowledge and skills – and those of their team – and feel safe in their roles.

Apprentices soon feel part of their operational team and they hone their fire and rescue skills across a range of real-life situations, including major incidents.

Apprentices enjoy putting what they have learned at the training centre into practice, once deployed to an operational watch. They are consistently respectful to their peers and other members of the crew watch, who support them.

Apprentices benefit from access to additional specialist training related to the identified risks of the locality and the specialism of the fire station they are attached to.

Apprentices' behaviour and attitudes are exceptionally well developed. They consistently demonstrate an unrelenting commitment to their training, exhibit high levels of respect for others and have an uncompromising focus on the communities they serve.

Apprentices routinely demonstrate exemplary attitudes to their personal development. They quickly develop very effective study skills, such as managing their own learning and use independent study time successfully to support and extend their insight, understanding and knowledge of essential fire and rescue procedures.

Station managers and training instructors ensure that all apprentices receive appropriate and regular training both on how to keep themselves safe and how to respond to a range of challenging situations.

Apprentices who already have the required level of English and mathematics qualifications on entry do not get the support to extend their skills and knowledge in these essential skills. The written feedback apprentices receive on their reflective learning logs is not consistently detailed or developmental to flag their achievements and set out clearly what they need to do next.

What does the provider do well and what does it need to do better?

Training instructors routinely use the information they have about what apprentices can do to plan and deliver learning that challenges them to make the progress of which they are capable. Instructors ensure that apprentices routinely practise and master a range of essential fire and rescue skills in a safe and controlled manner before they are considered ready for operational deployment to a station watch. These would include, for example, all apprentices completing mandatory situational awareness training with breathing apparatus sets, to ensure they make informed decisions – when undertaking search and rescue operations smoke-filled buildings – that prioritise their own safety and those of the station watch.

Apprentices confidently develop their knowledge and understanding of the principles related to the way fire behaves and spreads in a range of situations. For example, apprentices learn about the phenomenon of the 'coanda and stack effects' and how these are influenced by the shape and composition of burning materials, a building's ventilation, and the impact of any prevailing winds.

Once deployed to a station's watch, apprentices undertake additional research on specialised topics and are tasked with presenting their findings to the watch team. For example, one apprentice researched in detail about the challenges associated with attending road traffic accidents on 'smart' motorways, while another investigated the risks associated with the increased prevalence of electric vehicle chargers installed at domestic properties. Both presented their findings to their respective station watches.

Training instructors, station managers and watch officers use a range of effective assessment methods to assure apprentices' operational readiness and to check their progress in developing the required knowledge, skills and behaviours expected of a firefighter. For example, apprentices routinely refine their mastery of fire and rescue techniques as part of the service's standard operational drill-training requirements. They practise how to select and safely use the most appropriate type of water branch/nozzle for different types of fires and how to correctly position a ladder when undertaking a rescue operation at height.

Apprentices who are deployed to a fire station based in parts of the county that are prone to flooding receive additional training that extends their skills and knowledge in how to use the specialist equipment needed for water rescue. In more rural locations, apprentices are trained in how to use specialist resources to tackle wildland fires, such as those in peat bogs, or how to extricate safely people and livestock which are trapped in marshland or have fallen into deep ravines.

Apprentices are highly positive about their training and their relationships with their colleagues, mentors, and managers. As a result, they routinely exhibit excellent behaviours and demonstrate professional attitudes to their educational development

and employment. For example, one apprentice firefighter was awarded the 'Silver Axe' award for their attitude during the initial training phase.

Apprentices routinely exhibit exemplary standards of professional conduct in all aspects of their learning and development. They have a precise and well-informed understanding of the importance of punctuality and high levels of attendance at work and the implications of non-attendance on the operational capability of their allocated watch.

Apprentices benefit from effective inter-agency support and training on matters such as modern-day slavery, sexual exploitation, radicalisation and extremism, and the indicators that suggest that members of the community may be susceptible to fraudulent activities. They have a precise understanding of how to report such concerns. In addition, apprentices take an active role in promoting the safety of their communities by undertaking 'safe and well' visits. For example, an apprentice successfully used their training in unconscious bias and neurolinguistics when challenged by a local resident while providing fire safety advice.

Station and watch managers have carefully created a culture of inclusivity within the service across all watch teams in which apprentices feel safe, learn new skills, and develop confidence and resilience in their abilities as firefighters. Apprentices feel enthused and confident in replicating the exacting standards leaders and managers expect of them when on operational duty.

Through leaders' cultural messaging and the fire and rescue service's community engagement work, apprentices quickly internalise and routinely demonstrate the concepts of respect, citizenship, public service, and duty. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, apprentices and station crew assisted health colleagues at testing and vaccination sites and in distributing food packages to vulnerable members of their community.

Apprentices benefit from protected time to maintain both their physical and mental well-being. They routinely demonstrate high levels of commitment to maintaining their physical fitness and know how to access help and support such as the service's trauma risk-management programme, following attendance at life-changing incidents.

Apprentices benefit from regular opportunities to nurture and develop their wider talents and specialist skills, and in so doing become more self-confident and self-assured in their training and careers. For example, one apprentice was provided with sports leave to represent the national women's fire service rugby team; another apprentice was selected for the service's 'high potential' scheme, subsequently became a training instructor and has represented the authority as an ambassador at national inter-service skills competitions events.

Apprentices benefit from access to effective careers education support that provides them with clear and unambiguous information on what they need to do to succeed in their chosen career as firefighters. Upon graduation, they receive appropriate

advice regarding the next steps in their education and career. All apprentices either stay with the authority or gain employment with a neighbouring fire and rescue service. A few move on into more senior roles.

Under the direction of the chief fire officer, senior leaders and managers have worked very effectively to establish a positive culture of ambition for apprentices and the lifesaving and rescue skills they learn over time. At all levels of the fire and rescue service, there is a widespread commitment to ensure that apprentices have a precise and detailed understanding of the service's vision, its code of ethics and the authority's core safety plan in protecting the local communities they serve.

Leaders work closely with a range of regional and national partners, including the police, the NHS, and local authorities, to stay updated on relevant emergency service priorities. For example, in response to the ongoing threats posed by terrorism, apprentices and their watch team undertake regular operational training with other emergency response services to hone their response.

Instructors and training specialists, all of whom are highly experienced in a range of fire and rescue techniques, routinely provide apprentices with up-to-date knowledge and skills that are in line with published national operational guidance for fire and rescue services. Leaders and managers support them to consolidate and extend their extensive fire and rescue skills and knowledge through attendance at specialist training courses.

Leaders and managers use quality assurance and performance management systems very effectively. All employees, including apprentices, receive regular operational reviews that line managers record in detail and – where necessary – they take prompt and effective action when performance is not in line with the service's high expectations as set out in its operational procedures.

Leaders have an accurate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the apprenticeship programme that is informed by insightful feedback obtained from station managers, training instructors and through seeking the views of apprentices. However, leaders and managers have not fully addressed the recommendation identified at the monitoring visit to support all apprentices in developing their literacy and numeracy skills. In addition, a few targets and performance indicators in the service's quality improvement plan are not set against measurable and time-constrained indicators. As a result, leaders are unable to evaluate fully whether all improvement actions have been achieved or their impact on apprentices' experience.

Senior leaders within the fire and rescue service who exercise the function of operational governance have a good understanding of the organisation through the routine reports that they receive from the directorate and service delivery boards. Service leaders ensure their oversight of the apprenticeship programme is incorporated into wider organisational performance management reports that are subject to independent scrutiny and challenge through a range of external committees. Those in this governance role support and guide leaders and managers

well to ensure that the service meets its statutory responsibilities and operational priorities.

Apprentices who join the fire and rescue service without prior qualifications in literacy or numeracy do not receive specialist support until many months into their programme. In addition, training instructors and watch officers do not provide sufficient support to extend the English and mathematical skills of apprentices who have exemptions in these essential topics.

While staff responsible for apprentices' learning and development routinely provide good oral praise and encouragement, their written feedback is not always sufficiently detailed and developmental in setting out what apprentices do well or how they could improve the standard of their performance.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders and managers have established a comprehensive operational health and safety approach to the training and development of apprentices. They ensure that appropriately detailed risk assessments are in place to assure the health, safety and welfare of apprentices while undertaking training and on operational deployment.

Station and watch managers maintain a good level of vigilance for apprentices' well-being, particularly when they have been in attendance in providing rescue support at traumatic and life-changing incidents. Leaders ensure that clear processes and procedures are in place so that, where necessary, apprentices can quickly access specialist counselling and support.

Managers and designated safeguarding officers benefit from detailed safeguarding training commensurate with their specific roles, and which is refreshed on a regular basis. Leaders have established beneficial and productive contacts with local and regional safeguarding partners both to share intelligence and promote effective inter-agency work. Leaders and managers carry out appropriate pre-employment checks on all staff.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Increase the priority that leaders place on developing the English and mathematical skills of apprentices by ensuring that training instructors and watch managers routinely plan and support them to extend their confidence in these essential skills for success in the workplace and in their personal lives.
- Training instructors and watch managers should routinely provide apprentices with incisive and detailed written feedback setting out clearly what they do well and areas that they need to improve upon.

- Leaders should ensure that improvement actions detailed in the quality improvement plan are set against challenging, measurable, and time-bound targets, so that they may evaluate fully progress made in improving the apprentices' experience of learning.

Provider details

Unique reference number	2526613
Address	Staffordshire Fire & Rescue Service HQ Pirehill House Pirehill Stone ST15 0BS
Contact number	0300 330 1000
Website	https://www.staffordshirefire.gov.uk/
Principal/CEO	Rob Barber, Chief Fire Officer
Provider type	Employer
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Main subcontractors	None

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the head of learning & development, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous provider monitoring visit report. The inspection was carried out using the [further education and skills inspection handbook](#) and took into account all relevant provision at the provider. Inspectors collected a wide range of evidence to inform judgements, including visiting learning sessions, scrutinising learners' work, seeking the views of learners, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

Inspection team

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