Strategic Risks Facing UK Fire and Rescue Services: A Risk Management Perspective

Understanding, Mitigating, and Preparing for the Evolving Risk Landscape

# Introduction

The UK fire and rescue services (FRS) play a vital role in safeguarding communities, property, and the environment from fires and a diverse array of emergencies. Traditionally perceived as responders to fire incidents, the remit of FRS has evolved dramatically in recent decades. Today, these services are at the forefront of tackling an expanding spectrum of risks: from climate-induced wildfires and flooding, to supporting major incident response, and strengthening community resilience.

However, this evolving landscape brings with it a complex web of strategic risks that demand a sophisticated, forward-looking approach to risk management.

This article examines the principal strategic risks confronting UK fire and rescue services and explores practical strategies for mitigation, with a focus on insights useful to risk managers in both the public sector.

# The Changing Landscape of Strategic Risk

Strategic risks are those that threaten an organisation’s core mission, reputation, and long-term objectives. For UK fire and rescue services, these risks frequently arise from shifts in their operating environment, including policy changes, societal expectations, financial constraints, technological developments, and global phenomena like climate change. Unlike operational risks—which are often immediate and tactical—strategic risks have far-reaching, systemic impacts and can undermine the very foundations of effective service delivery.

## Evolving and Expanding Mandate

The FRS has seen its role expand far beyond traditional firefighting. Modern FRS responsibilities encompass:

* Rescue from road traffic collisions and other emergencies
* Response to flooding and other severe weather events
* Community safety education and fire prevention
* Pandemic and public health crisis support
* Hazardous materials incidents

While this diversification enhances public value, it also introduces strategic risks around capability, training, and resource allocation.

# Key Strategic Risks Facing UK Fire and Rescue Services

## 1. Climate Change and Environmental Risks

Increasingly erratic weather patterns, hotter summers, and prolonged dry spells contribute to more frequent and severe wildfires, especially in rural and semi-urban areas previously considered low risk. Conversely, heavier rainfall and flooding pose operational challenges, requiring new skills, equipment, and inter-agency collaboration. Climate change also raises questions about asset resilience, firefighter safety, and the adequacy of current risk models. The following article from the NFCC explores this issue further in relation to wildfires and offers a stark warning of the need to invest in the fire service [New wildfire record sparks urgent call for fire service investment - NFCC](https://nfcc.org.uk/new-wildfire-record-sparks-urgent-call-for-fire-service-investment/)

Risk Mitigation:

* Invest in scenario planning and stress-testing for climate impacts
* Collaborate with environmental agencies and local authorities
* Ensure training and equipment are fit for evolving hazards
* Incorporate climate risk into procurement, asset management and capital planning

## 2. Financial Pressures and Sustainability

Austerity measures and constrained public finances have exerted significant pressure on FRS budgets. Strategic risks emerge when cost-saving measures threaten frontline services, training quality, or infrastructure maintenance. There is a risk of underinvestment in innovation, digital transformation, resourcing and staff wellbeing.

Risk Mitigation:

* Adopt multi-year financial planning and robust prioritisation
* Explore shared services and collaboration to drive efficiencies
* Engage in advocacy for sustainable funding models
* Invest in data-driven decision-making for resource allocation

## 3. Technological Change and Cybersecurity Threats

Digital technology underpins modern FRS operations, from command-and-control systems to community engagement platforms. While this unlocks efficiencies, it amplifies exposure to cyberattacks, data breaches, and system failures. There is a strategic risk of technological obsolescence and insufficient cyber resilience.

Risk Mitigation:

* Implement regular cyber risk assessments and penetration testing
* Foster a culture of cybersecurity awareness across all staff
* Develop robust incident response and recovery plans
* Keep technology and digital skills current through continuous professional development

## 4. Changing Demographics and Community Expectations

The UK’s population is ageing, urbanising, and becoming more culturally diverse. These demographic shifts influence risk profiles—vulnerable populations may require tailored prevention programs or different approaches to outreach. Simultaneously, there is rising public expectation for transparency, accountability, and inclusivity from public services.

Risk Mitigation:

* Regularly review service delivery models for inclusivity and accessibility
* Engage communities in risk assessment and prevention initiatives
* Invest in workforce diversity and cultural competence
* Strengthen partnerships with health, social care, and voluntary sectors

## 5. Talent Management and Workforce Resilience

Recruitment and retention of skilled personnel present an acute strategic risk, especially as experienced staff retire and competition for talent intensifies. The unique challenges of FRS work—physical risk, irregular hours, emotional demands—further strain workforce resilience. Leadership succession and knowledge transfer are critical, as is the promotion of health, safety, and wellbeing.

Risk Mitigation:

* Develop robust workforce planning and talent pipelines
* Enhance training, mentoring, and leadership development programmes
* Promote mental health support and flexible working arrangements
* Embed continuous learning and innovation in organisational culture

## 6. Strategic Partnerships, Interoperability and Collaboration

When establishing strategic partnerships, particularly in innovative models such as multi service officers or arrangements where personnel drive ambulances for partner agencies, questions of liability become paramount. The division of legal responsibility, be it for health and safety, operational decision-making, or professional conduct, must be clearly articulated at the outset. In practice, liability can fall on the employing organisation, the host agency, or in some cases, both, depending on the terms of formal agreements and the legal frameworks governing joint operations.

As these roles often traverse the boundaries between fire, emergency medical, and policing functions, it is essential that memoranda of understanding, secondment agreements, and insurance provisions are comprehensive and unambiguous. This helps ensure all parties understand where accountability lies in the event of an incident, complaint, or adverse outcome. Joint governance structures and regular review of protocols further mitigate the risk of gaps or overlaps in liability. Ultimately, clarity and transparency in these arrangements underpin the effectiveness and resilience of strategic partnerships, protecting both staff and the public they serve.

Risk Mitigation:

* Develop and regularly update comprehensive memoranda of understanding (MOUs) and partnership agreements, clearly outlining roles, responsibilities, and legal accountabilities.
* Ensure all personnel engaged in cross-agency work receive targeted training on liability, governance, and operational expectations.
* Establish robust insurance coverage and clear indemnity provisions across all partner organisations.
* Implement joint governance bodies to oversee partnership arrangements, review incidents, and adapt protocols as legislation and best practice evolve.
* Conduct periodic audits and scenario-based exercises to test the clarity and effectiveness of liability arrangements.
* Promote open channels for feedback and lesson-sharing to continuously improve partnership risk management.

Major incidents increasingly demand multi-agency coordination, whether with police, ambulance, local authorities, or national agencies. Failure to achieve interoperable communications, joint training, and information sharing can delay response, compromise safety, and erode public trust.

Risk Mitigation:

* Invest in interoperable systems and cross-agency training
* Establish clear governance and protocols for joint operations
* Participate in regional and national exercises to test readiness
* Share lessons learned and best practices across services

## 7. Regulatory Change and Governance Complexity

Fire and rescue services operate in a highly regulated landscape, subject to evolving legislation, inspection regimes, and government guidance. Strategic risks may occur when regulatory requirements change quickly or are interpreted in varying ways, which can result in compliance issues or affect reputation.

Devolution, while offering opportunities for tailored local governance and increased autonomy, introduces a unique set of risks for fire and rescue services. As responsibilities are redistributed across regional or local authorities, variations in funding, expertise, and priorities may emerge. This can lead to inconsistencies in service standards, fragmented operational protocols, and uneven access to critical resources. With differing interpretations of national policy and fluctuating political landscapes, services risk losing coherence in strategy and response capabilities.

Moreover, devolved structures may complicate multi-agency collaboration, particularly when neighbouring jurisdictions operate under divergent frameworks or governance arrangements. The lack of harmonised communications and training may hinder interoperability, delaying joint responses in major incidents and compromising public safety. Regulatory oversight may also become more complex, as local governance bodies develop and implement distinct compliance models, potentially increasing exposure to legal and reputational risks.

To mitigate these challenges, fire and rescue services must invest in robust cross-boundary partnerships, clear escalation paths, and continuous monitoring of devolved processes. Proactive engagement with both local and national regulators, alongside strategic investment in staff training on governance and legislative change, will be essential to ensure resilience and consistent public protection within an evolving landscape of devolution.

Risk Mitigation:

* Maintain robust horizon scanning and policy monitoring functions
* Engage proactively with regulators and sector bodies
* Ensure governance structures support agility and compliance
* Invest in staff training on regulatory and ethical standards

## 8. Health Risks to Personnel

Contaminant exposure remains one of the most significant threats for operational firefighters and support staff. During fire incidents, hazardous substances such as carcinogens, toxic chemicals, particulates, and biological agents are released, posing acute and chronic health risks. Repeated exposure may lead to respiratory illnesses, cancers, skin conditions, and other occupational diseases.

* Short-term health impacts: Immediate effects may include eye and throat irritation, headaches, nausea, and exacerbation of underlying conditions such as asthma.
* Long-term health impacts: Research indicates increased risk of cancer, cardiovascular disease, and reproductive issues among firefighters with prolonged exposure to smoke, soot, and chemical residues.
* Mental health implications: The stress associated with potential health threats can also contribute to anxiety, depression, and reduced morale.

Mitigating contaminant risks demands an integrated and proactive approach:

* Regular risk assessments and horizon scanning for new hazards.
* Investment in advanced PPE and decontamination technology.
* Embedding contaminant risk awareness at all organisational levels.
* Transparent reporting of exposures, incidents, and near-misses.
* Long-term health monitoring and support for affected staff.
* Stakeholder engagement, including collaboration with regulatory bodies, unions, and the wider health sector.

# Developing a Proactive Risk Management Strategy

In the face of these strategic risks, fire and rescue services must adopt proactive, dynamic risk management frameworks. This entails not only risk identification and mitigation but also fostering an organisational culture where strategic risks are openly discussed, monitored, and escalated when necessary.

Key success factors include:

* Integrated risk management systems aligned to strategic objectives
* Regular risk horizon scanning and scenario planning
* Embedding risk thinking in all levels of decision-making
* Transparent reporting and learning from near-misses and incidents
* Stakeholder engagement to ensure risks are understood in context

# Conclusion

The strategic risk landscape facing UK fire and rescue services is more dynamic and challenging than ever before. From environmental volatility and financial pressures to technological evolution and shifting societal expectations, FRS leaders and risk managers must remain vigilant, adaptable, and collaborative. By understanding these risks—and by investing in mitigation strategies, workforce resilience, and a culture of learning—services can not only safeguard their mission but also continue to innovate and deliver public value in a complex world.

Strategic risk management is not simply a compliance exercise; it is fundamental to ensuring that UK fire and rescue services remain robust, trusted, and effective against both present and future threats. For risk managers across the sector, this represents both a profound challenge and a critical opportunity.