

AUDITOR GENERAL

Halifax Regional Municipality



Management of the Fire Inspection Program Audit

September 2021

September 13, 2021

The following audit of **Management of the Fire Inspection Program**, completed under section 50(2) of the Halifax Regional Municipality Charter, is hereby submitted to the Audit and Finance Standing Committee of Regional Council.

Respectfully,

Original signed

Table of Contents

Audit Overview	3
Audit Results.....	4
Fire Inspection Program Needs Significant Improvement	4
Lack of clear plans	4
Lack of robust plans to address risk	5
Failure to Manage and Meet Legislative Responsibilities	6
Compliance orders and follow up	10
Lack of quality assurance processes.....	13
Staff and training.....	15
Performance indicators	16
Other Audit Matters – Poor Communication between Halifax Fire, and Planning and Development.....	17
Planning and Development stopped performing fire inspections	19
Background.....	20
About the Audit.....	23
Appendix 1 – Recommendations and Management Responses.....	25
Contact Information	31

Management of the Fire Inspection Program Audit

Failure to effectively manage important aspects of Fire Inspection Program

Oversight Needs Improvement

- Have not determined resources needed to meet legislative responsibilities
- Lack of detailed plans to address known risks
- Limited quality assurance on completed inspections
- No standard approach for inspection paper files
- No defined plans to address limited training opportunities

Failing to Meet Legislative Obligations

- System of fire inspections not adequate
- 40% inspections we sampled not completed on time
 - Four to 17 years without an inspection for one building type sample
- No reliable list of inspectable buildings
- Certain operational fire officers complete limited-scope inspections
 - Not clear if these meet legislated requirements
- Lack of performance indicators
 - One indicator – percentage legislated inspections completed
 - Target is less than half required inspections

Compliance and Follow up

- Violations followed up
 - Not always timely
- Deadlines for extensions not documented
- Orders-to-comply not always issued

Other Audit Matters

Poor Communication

- With HRM Planning & Development
- Fire has concerns regarding subdivision water sources for fire fighting
- Need to work with P&D regarding fire safety concerns
- Lack complete list of where dry hydrants are required

Audit Results

Halifax Fire is not effectively overseeing and managing important aspects of the fire inspection program. Halifax Fire is not meeting its legislated fire inspection mandate. Management has taken some steps to address this, but detailed plans are required to address remaining identified challenges. Halifax Fire has not established an adequate system of fire inspections, as required by legislation. Management does not have a reliable list of buildings to inspect and there is limited quality assurance and management monitoring of inspections.

Fire Inspection Program Needs Significant Improvement

Summary – Halifax Fire is not meeting its legislated fire inspection obligations. Senior management determined the fire inspection model was not sustainable. While some changes have been made, detailed plans of how further improvements will be achieved are lacking. Senior management identified the fire inspection program as a risk area but has no documented plans to address how known risks will be managed. Legislation requires Halifax Fire develop a system of fire inspections. However, the system is inadequate, and is not ensuring timely completion of inspections.

Lack of clear plans

Halifax Fire is not meeting its legislated fire inspection obligations. Senior management identified concerns with the Fire Prevention Division's organizational structure and the ability to meet the Division's fire inspection mandate. In 2019, Halifax Fire management created fire inspector positions, in addition to existing fire prevention officers. The new positions require different qualifications and those staff only complete fire inspections. As of August 2021, there were currently eight fire inspectors.

Management told us they intend to make additional structure changes but have no detailed plans with objectives and timelines to achieve this. Management said there are not enough fire inspection staff to inspect all buildings that require one; however, they have not analyzed how many are needed to meet legislative obligations.

Management should be accountable for ensuring the Division meets legislative obligations. While management responsibilities are established in job descriptions, there are no specific objectives for the Fire Prevention Division or fire inspection program.

Recommendation 1

Halifax Fire should develop and implement detailed plans, with timelines, to meet fire inspection obligations.

Management Response

Agree.

HRFE has developed a sustainable organizational chart and job descriptions to address the challenges in completing the mandated fire inspections. These changes are being negotiated with the Union and the timelines and plans are contingent upon negotiations of the new positions and structure. HRFE will document and communicate the plan when negotiations are complete.

Our recent effort includes:

- *development and implementation of a restructure of the Fire Prevention Division;*
 - *strategically divided work into new job positions.*
 - *introduced and implemented one of the new positions (qualified Fire Inspector) in 2019.*
 - *additional positions are being negotiated.*
- *creation of a new Memorandum of Understanding between Planning and Development and HRFE to align fire inspectors with fire inspections and building officials with M200 By-law inspections.*
- *ongoing reports of inspection performance to Council who sets the level of service through the AO and the budget process:*
 - *introduction of the Fire Safety Maintenance Inspection program; and*
 - *added 2 more Fire Inspectors 2020/21 Business Plan/budget process;*

Immediate future efforts will include identification of specific goals and objectives for managerial staff (already added to mandates for 2022.)

HRFE will add additional staff positions in the 2021/2022 budget and business plans.

Lack of robust plans to address risk

Halifax Fire management identified the fire inspection program as a risk area but does not have comprehensive plans to address risks.

Nova Scotia Fire Safety Regulations establish timeframes for assembly building fire inspections and require Halifax Fire determine a system of inspections for other types of buildings. We expected this would include a risk-based process for how inspections will be completed. Senior and division management do not know how often buildings of varying types should be inspected.

It is senior management’s responsibility to determine where the risks are, what is needed to manage them appropriately, and to communicate to Regional Council if there are insufficient resources to do so.

Failure to perform fire inspections on time can have an impact on public safety and the safety of fire crews. When inspections are not performed, the fire code is not enforced, creating a higher risk there are unsafe building conditions where members of the public gather or live. Periodic fire inspections also educate property and business owners on how to mitigate fire safety risks, such as ensuring emergency exits are clear, regularly testing emergency lights, and regularly inspecting fire extinguishers and sprinkler systems. These factors impact how long occupants have to escape a fire. Fire inspections may reduce risk of injury to fire crews responding to a fire by identifying potential hazards, such as improper storage of hazardous materials.

Recommendation 2

Halifax Fire should document and prioritize risks to the Fire Prevention Division’s operations and take steps to mitigate as appropriate.

Management Response

Agreed.

HRFE is already working towards the accomplishment of this recommendation as part of the branch reorganization.

HRFE performs an annual risk registry and this year included a risk assessment of “An incident resulting in an injury, loss of life, or property that is partially or wholly due to the failure to meet inspection requirements under Nova Scotia Fire Safety Act and AO 2018-006-OP”

Failure to Manage and Meet Legislative Responsibilities

Summary – Halifax Fire is not meeting its legislative obligations under the *Nova Scotia Fire Safety Act and Regulations*. The Act requires Halifax Fire establish a system of fire inspections. However, Fire’s system is not adequate. We found many buildings that require a fire inspection are not receiving them in a timely manner. Overall, forty percent of the samples we looked at for which Halifax Fire was previously aware of the business or property were not completed on time.

We examined 60 completed fire inspections:

- Twenty for buildings requiring inspections every three years
- Thirty-eight for buildings that should be inspected based on a system of inspection which Halifax Fire should have established
- Timing of the remaining two fire inspections was determined by Provincial licensing requirements.

We found many buildings that require a fire inspection are not receiving them in a timely manner. The following table shows the percentage of completed legislated inspections in recent years. The first column includes limited-scope inspections, often completed by operational fire officers. The second excludes those inspections. Limited-scope inspections are discussed later in this report.

Year	Completed Inspections*	Completed Inspections excluding Limited-Scope*
2020	16%	12%
2019	12%	7%
2018	20%	14%
2017	20%	15%

*Source: Halifax Regional Fire and Emergency Budget and Business Plan 2021-22

During fieldwork, management told us there is no reliable date that can be used as a starting point for when the next inspection is due. Subsequent to fieldwork, management said they would consider the occupancy date as the starting point for inspecting properties because their IT system is updated with this information. However, fire inspection staff do not use the occupancy permit date to schedule fire inspections. If a business did not obtain an occupancy permit, we considered whether Halifax Fire was aware that the business required an inspection.

We selected 20 sample inspections for buildings which require an inspection every three years. Forty-five percent of those inspections were not completed in a timely manner. Buildings, that by *Nova Scotia Fire Safety Regulations*, require an inspection every three years, were not done in that timeframe.

- Eleven were inspected on time.
- Nine were not inspected within the three-year requirement.
 - These went between four and 17 years without an inspection.

Years Before Inspection for Nine Buildings

	Building								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Years Before Inspection	7	4	8	7	17	10	6	6	13

While *Nova Scotia Fire Safety Regulations* require assembly buildings be inspected every three years, it does not specify how often other building types should be inspected. In 2009, management determined inspection frequencies for these building types. During our audit, management told us they do not know if these frequencies are appropriate. However, since these were the only inspection frequencies Halifax Fire had, we tested a sample of 38 inspections against these timelines.

Thirty-seven percent of the samples we looked at for which Halifax Fire was previously aware of the business or property did not meet the timelines established in 2009.

- Thirteen were not performed within the timeframe determined by management.
- Twenty-two were performed within the timeframe.
- For three, Halifax Fire was not previously aware of the business, so we did not expect a previous inspection.

We did not have any issues with inspection timing for the remaining sample items.

Halifax Fire does not have a reliable, up-to-date list of inspectable buildings. Halifax Fire's information system is used for all fire operations, so it includes buildings that do not need fire inspections. Management told us that due to data issues, they cannot use system information to determine with certainty whether a building requires a fire inspection.

Fire Prevention staff use a list of buildings created in 2019 to schedule fire inspections. This list was manually created. There is a risk it was not complete; and it has not been updated.

Prior to December 2020, Halifax Fire's system was updated with property data from HRM's building permit system. However, HRM implemented a new permitting system in December 2020 and Halifax Fire's system has not been updated since. HRM IT management told us they are working on a solution to allow Halifax Fire's system to be updated.

Recommendation 3

Halifax Fire should develop and implement a system of fire inspections, including how often buildings should be inspected. Scheduling and monitoring processes should also be developed and implemented to ensure fire inspections are completed as planned.

Management Response

Agreed.

HRFE has been working on improving the accuracy of the inspectable building list in preparation for this outcome. In 2017, HRFE's system was updated to align with the corporate GIS model in order to initiate a standardized and reliable location for updating property records.

HRFE will work with ICT and P&D to accomplish this recommendation.

Recommendation 4

Halifax Fire should establish a regular update process to ensure it has a current and accurate inventory of inspectable buildings.

Management Response

Agreed.

In 2017, HRFE's system was updated to align with the corporate GIS model but there is no corporate initiative presently to update the existing data.

HRFE will work with ICT and P&D to accomplish this recommendation.

Recommendation 5

Halifax Fire should work with People, Communications and Information Technology; and Planning and Development to determine how to transfer property data from HRM's new permitting system to update Halifax Fire's system.

Management Response

Agreed.

HRFE is already working with our partners in PCIT and Planning and Development to see this objective completed.

HRFE has been in preliminary discussions with Planning and Development on their interaction with the GIS Building Model as they recently implemented a new software solution that may expand on their capability to fulfill this task.

Compliance orders and follow up

During inspections, fire safety violations may be identified. Timely follow up is important to make sure public safety risks are quickly dealt with and to help ensure fire code compliance is taken seriously. We found Halifax Fire inspection staff followed up most violations noted during fire inspections to ensure compliance. However, it was not consistently done in a timely manner.

Of the 60 fire inspections we sampled (30 by fire inspection staff, 30 limited-scope inspections), almost all with violations noted were subsequently followed up to ensure compliance.

We looked at 30 inspections completed by fire inspection staff. Most were followed up, if required. However, inspection follow up was not always timely.

- Twenty-four inspections noted violations.
 - One was not followed up to ensure compliance.
 - In another four cases, there were long delays following up.

Division management told us they believe delays following up were due to granting extensions. However, there is no evidence of this. If extensions are granted, documenting details is important so deadlines are recorded and there is adequate documentation should Halifax Fire need to take enforcement steps. It would also provide important information for management to monitor timeliness of inspection follow up.

Of the 24 inspections with violations, fire inspection staff did not issue orders-to-comply in six instances.

- For one of the six, the issue was resolved the same day, so it is reasonable an order was not issued.
- In three cases, a notice-to-comply was issued. Management said these notices are not legally enforceable and are no longer issued.
- The remaining two were followed up in a reasonable timeframe but orders-to-comply were not issued.

It is important to issue and maintain correspondence in case of appeal or legal proceedings.

Recommendation 6

Halifax Fire should issue orders-to-comply, where appropriate, and maintain key correspondence related to fire inspections, for an appropriate retention period.

Management Response

Agreed.

HRFE will develop a list of key correspondence to be included in the inspection process.

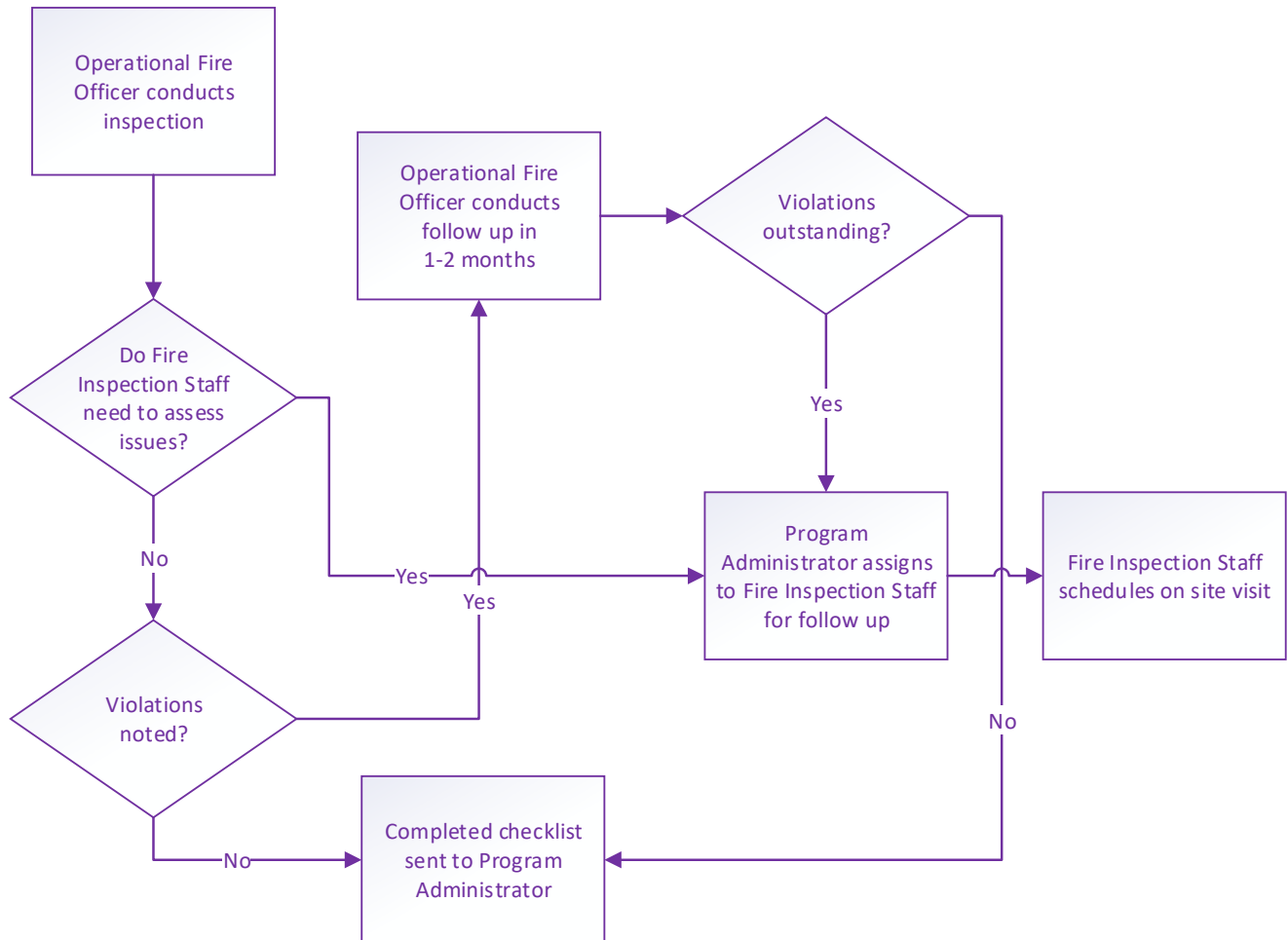
We looked at 30 limited-scope fire inspections, these are often completed by operational fire officers. Twenty-five of 30 noted violations. All 25 were followed up to ensure compliance. However, nine were not followed up within established timelines. Scheduling staff said this was primarily due to timing issues between the building owner and operational fire officers.

If operational fire officers note a violation that is not covered by their checklist, or if a violation is still outstanding during a follow-up visit, additional follow up is completed by a fire inspection staff member. However, there is no process to prioritize fire inspections that operational fire officers have flagged for further investigation.

Sixteen of the 25 limited-scope fire inspections with violations noted were escalated to fire inspection staff for follow up. However, follow up was not completed in a timely manner.

- On average, follow up took 97 days.
- In one case, fire inspection staff did not follow up for 16 months.

Operations Fire Inspection Process



Recommendation 7

When follow up of limited-scope inspections must be escalated to fire inspection staff, Halifax Fire should determine and communicate follow-up timelines and monitor completion dates.

Management Response

Agreed.

HRFE recognized this issue and recently put into place a daily inspection report to identify referrals and will establish specific timelines to address this recommendation.

Lack of quality assurance processes

While management tracks pending inspections, and follows up with inspection staff, there is limited quality assurance to confirm fire inspections were properly completed and documented. Management told us for unsatisfactory inspections, Fire's IT system flags the need for a re-inspection. We expected management to regularly review a sample of fire inspections to confirm they were completed properly and adequately documented. We found there is no standard approach to document fire inspections completed by fire inspection staff, making it hard to determine if key items were missed during the inspection. Division management developed a process in August 2020 that outlines minimum documentation to maintain for inspection files. However, this is not followed or enforced. Documenting requirements without implementing and enforcing does not establish an appropriate tone of attention to the importance of fire inspection processes for the Division.

Fire inspections are recorded in Fire's IT system but, based on interviews with fire inspection staff, there is no consistent understanding of what must be documented in hard copy inspection files. Without a standard approach, Halifax Fire may not have key information required if there is an appeal or legal proceeding. This could also make quality assurance reviews more difficult. Halifax Fire management is not effectively managing fire inspection processes. It is management's job to ensure staff have appropriate guidance to do their jobs and to ensure that guidance is followed.

Recommendation 8

Halifax Fire should develop and implement a quality assurance process to monitor that fire inspections are properly completed and documented. This should include developing guidance to promote consistency across inspection staff, which should help facilitate the quality assurance process.

Management Response

Agreed.

HRFE will develop a documented quality assurance process that provides direction for supervisory staff to conduct a minimum number of fire inspection audits.

Fire inspection policies and procedures are outdated. Most have not been reviewed or revised since 2012. They do not reflect current operations. Management told us they need to be revised. There are also no fire inspection checklists covering common, high-risk items for fire inspection staff. However, operational fire officers use checklists for the limited-scope fire inspections they perform.

Recommendation 9

Halifax Fire should update its fire inspection policies and procedures and establish a regular review process to maintain them going forward.

Management Response

Agreed.

There is limited management of staff productivity. Division management has not determined the number of inspections staff should complete. As noted earlier, in 2019, fire inspection staff were given lists of buildings to inspect, based on risk. Each list had hundreds of buildings. Fire inspection staff also receive inspection requests from other sources, such as businesses requesting inspections required for liquor licensing, or fire safety complaints; some also have non-inspection duties such as fire investigations and public education. While there are deadlines for some requests, management has not given fire inspection staff direction on how to prioritize most aspects of their work. As a result, fire inspection resources may not be used effectively. Buildings which contain fire hazards may not be inspected in a timely manner, which could put the safety of the occupants in those buildings at risk.

Recommendation 10

Halifax Fire should establish expectations for fire inspection staff productivity and provide staff with guidance on how to prioritize inspections and other duties.

Management Response

Agreed.

COVID impacted HRFE's ability schedule inspections over the past 18 months based on business's operational hours and staff safety. HRFE will continue to evaluate current inspection capabilities with the newly implemented fire inspector positions and the existing fire prevention officer positions and monitor productivity.

HRFE sets targets for all customer service-based inquiries which are regularly reported on and audited by staff in HRM's Corporate & Customer Services Business Unit. HRFE assigns fire inspection assignments for individual inspectors/officers that are sorted by risk.

HRFE has initiated a quarterly review process for all staff in the Fire Prevention Division.

Staff and training

Training requirements were identified for fire inspection staff.

Fire prevention officers, who perform fire inspections, are expected to complete Level 1 and Level 2 fire inspector certifications offered by the Fire Inspectors Association of Nova Scotia within three years of being hired. However, division management said courses are only offered twice a year. We confirmed it takes six years to complete training due to limited course offerings. It is impossible for fire prevention officers to meet training requirements in the timeframe management has established.

We looked at training records for three fire prevention officers.

- One completed both certifications in eight years.
- One completed Level 1 certification in two years.
- One had not completed any inspector training.

It is important staff receive training in a timely manner to ensure they have the appropriate skills to perform fire inspections. Division management told us they discussed developing an internal training program to address limited course availability. However, there are no concrete plans, with timelines, to do so. Division management is also investigating training options from other jurisdictions but has not determined whether these training programs are appropriate for Halifax Fire's purposes.

In 2019, fire inspector positions were created. Fire inspectors are required to have either building official or fire inspector certification upon hire. If they do not have fire inspector training, management told us staff are expected to complete this training. However, management has not documented this requirement or set a timeline for completion. We looked at training records for three fire inspectors.

- All three completed some fire inspector courses but none had completed all courses required for Level 1 certification.
- All were in their role for two years. During that time, some courses were not offered due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendation 11

Halifax Fire should develop concrete plans, with timelines, for fire inspection staff to receive sufficient training in a timely manner.

Management Response

Agreed.

HRFE is currently researching alternative training options to mitigate the challenges noted above.

Some operational fire officers perform limited-scope fire inspections which do not cover all the areas a typical fire inspection would. For example, a limited-scope inspection includes checking if a building's sprinkler system was inspected annually but does not include determining if the building requires a sprinkler system. Officers performing these inspections expressed a lack of comfort with these limitations, and with their ability to identify violations, since they are not trained fire inspection staff. Senior management told us these inspections are only carried out on lower-risk buildings. They also said they believe these inspections meet legislative obligations, despite being limited in scope. In addressing recommendation 2 from this report, Halifax Fire management will need to consider how limited-scope inspections fit in the overall fire inspection program.

Performance indicators

Halifax Fire has one performance indicator for the Fire Prevention Division – percent of completed legislated inspections. The planned percentage of completed legislated inspections for the coming year is reported in Halifax Fire's business plan to Regional Council. However, senior management told us they do not know if the target is reasonable. Additionally, the percentage of legislated inspections completed includes the limited-scope inspections carried out by operational fire officers. The planned percentage of completed legislated inspections is low, ranging from approximately one-fifth to one-third of what Halifax Fire is required to complete.

- Calendar year 2021 – 20%
- Fiscal year 2020-2021 – 35%
- Fiscal year 2019-2020 – 31%

Management does not have support for how they calculated the percentage of completed legislated inspections reported in the business plan. There are no other performance indicators used by the Division. Performance indicators and targets are useful in measuring performance and identifying areas for improvement.

Recommendation 12

Halifax Fire should develop performance indicators for the Fire Prevention Division, establish targets, and regularly monitor against them.

Management Response

Agreed.

HRFE will continue to identify and implement appropriate KPI's to report progress on meeting legislative and policy-based requirements to conduct inspections.

Other Audit Matters – Poor Communication between Halifax Fire, and Planning and Development

Halifax Fire management told us certain subdivisions were built without appropriate fire safety specifications, such as inadequate water sources to fight fires. Specific subdivisions of concern include: Indigo Shores Subdivision in Middle Sackville, Westwood Hills Subdivision in Upper Tantallon and White Hills Subdivision in Hammonds Plains.

Planning and Development management told us they were not made aware of these concerns. They also said they seek Halifax Fire's input, but do not require it. The expectation is that Halifax Fire will communicate whether they want to be involved in the review of a subdivision application.

We reviewed the initial approvals for these subdivisions. In two cases, there was evidence the application was provided to Halifax Fire for review but only one had documentation of Halifax Fire's feedback. A Halifax Fire staff member involved in the review of the Indigo Shores Subdivision in 2005 expressed concern around lack of water sources and suggested considering a dry hydrant. However, there is no documentation indicating why this was not a requirement for the subdivision.

In our 2018 audit of Development Approvals, we noted there was no policy to determine which HRM business units should be involved in reviewing planning applications.

Halifax Fire senior management told us inadequate water sources are being addressed through a capital project to install and maintain dry fire hydrants in subdivisions that require them. However, there is no list with plans for when and where dry hydrants will be installed. Management provided a list of ten areas where this is an issue but told us there are many more.

Recommendation 13

Halifax Fire should work with Planning and Development to address concerns regarding Halifax Fire's involvement in planning applications.

Management Response

Agreed.

HRFE is in the process of implementing a new structure change within the Fire Prevention Division that will include a designated Plans Examiner position which will be aligned with planning and development to address concerns around planning application and infrastructure development. HRFE has already started working closer with P&D and TPW.

Recommendation 14

Halifax Fire should develop a complete list of dry hydrant needs and determine how it will prioritize capital funding for these.

Management Response

Agreed.

HRFE is in the process of implementing a new structure change within the Fire Prevention Division that will include a designated Plans Examiner position which will work closely with P&D to identify communities with a requirement for a static water source for firefighting purposes.

The installation and maintenance of this infrastructure is funded through the capital budget approved by Council.

Planning and Development stopped performing fire inspections

Historically, Planning and Development was responsible for performing fire inspections on small, multi-unit, residential properties. However, they stopped completing these inspections in May 2019. Planning and Development management told us they stopped due to vacancies and workload. As of April 2021, Halifax Fire is now responsible for these inspections. For a two-year period, neither Planning and Development, nor Halifax Fire, were inspecting these properties. Certain small residential properties are overdue for fire inspections. Implementing the recommendations in this report should address these properties as well.

Background

The Fire Prevention Division of Halifax Regional Fire and Emergency (Halifax Fire) is responsible for conducting fire inspections, fire investigations, and providing public education. Fire inspectors and fire prevention officers carry out these duties. Fire inspections assess buildings for compliance with the *Nova Scotia Fire Safety Act*, which includes consideration of the *National Fire Code of Canada* and applicable sections of the *National Building Code of Canada* that impact fire safety.

Operational fire officers, who work in the Operations Division, also perform limited-scope fire inspections on some properties. These are simplified inspections that do not involve application of the codes and are completed using a checklist.

The *Nova Scotia Fire Safety Act* section 19 (1) (a) states that municipalities are responsible for conducting fire-safety inspections of properties within their jurisdictions. The *Fire Safety Regulations* section 14 states “A municipality must inspect an assembly occupancy (Group A) once every three years...” and “A municipality must carry out a system of fire inspections on all buildings containing the following occupancies:

- (a) A residential occupancy (Group C) that has more than 3 units and is not regulated under the *Homes for Special Care Act*;
- (b) A business and personal services occupancy (Group D)
- (c) A mercantile occupancy (Group E); and
- (d) An industrial occupancy (Group F).”

In HRM, some buildings are inspected by the Nova Scotia Office of the Fire Marshall; others are Halifax Fire’s responsibility. Halifax Fire estimates it is responsible to inspect approximately 15,000 buildings.

Occupancy Classifications from National Building Code

Occupancy Class	Description	Example of Building in Occupancy Class
A-1	Assembly intended for viewing performing arts	Theatres
A-2	Assembly not elsewhere classified	Restaurants, Churches
A-3	Assembly of arena type	Arenas
A-4	Assembly in which occupants gathered in open air	Bleachers, Grandstands
B-1	Care	Jails, Psychiatric hospitals with detention quarters
B-2	Care	Hospitals, Nursing homes with treatment
B-3	Care	Halifax Fire is responsible for some facilities in this category, such as daycares. All others are a provincial responsibility.
C	Residential	Apartments, Hotels, Dormitories
D	Business and Personal Services	Banks, Offices, Barber shops, Medical Offices
E	Mercantile	Department Stores, Shops, Supermarkets
F-1	High-hazard Industrial	Distilleries, Chemical Manufacturing or Processing Plants
F-2	Medium-hazard Industrial	Aircraft Hangars, Factories, Repair Garages, Warehouses
F-3	Low-hazard Industrial	Power Plants, Salesrooms, Storage Rooms, Creameries

Source: National Building Code of Canada 2015 Volume 1

Fire Prevention Division's operating budget mostly consists of staff salaries.

Annual Operating Budget and Expenses for Fire Prevention Division

Division	2019-20 Budget	2019-20 Actual	2018-19 Budget	2018-19 Actual	2017-18 Budget	2017-18 Actual
Fire Prevention	\$2,636,000	\$2,043,581	\$2,367,800	\$1,653,849	\$2,120,800	\$1,739,527

Source: SAP

About the Audit

We completed a performance audit of the management of the fire inspection program.

The purpose of the audit was to determine whether Halifax Fire appropriately oversees and adequately manages its fire inspection program. Our role is to express an independent audit opinion of this area.

The objectives of the audit were to:

- assess whether Halifax Fire has processes to ensure appropriate oversight of the fire inspection program; and
- determine whether Halifax Fire is appropriately managing its legislated fire inspection processes.

We developed the criteria for this audit. These were discussed with, and accepted as appropriate by, Halifax Fire management.

1. Management responsibilities for the Fire Prevention Division should be established and program objectives defined.
2. Plans to achieve Fire Prevention Division objectives should be developed and implemented.
3. Risk analysis and assessments should be completed.
4. Management should develop plans to address identified challenges and appropriately communicate to Regional Council.
5. Halifax Fire should have relevant and reasonable performance targets and monitor results against those targets.
6. Halifax Fire should have a system to complete fire inspections in accordance with legislation.
7. Halifax Fire should have documented policies and procedures for carrying out fire inspections.
8. Halifax Fire should have a process to monitor fire inspections.
9. Halifax Fire should have processes to ensure employees who conduct fire inspections have appropriate training.

Our audit period was April 1, 2016 to March 31, 2021. Information from outside the audit period was considered as necessary.

Our audit approach included: interviews with management and staff; review of internal policies and procedures; observation of activities and operations; data analysis and examination of documents on a sample basis.

This audit was conducted in accordance with the Canadian Standard on Assurance Engagements (CSAE) 3001 Direct Engagements published by the Chartered Professional Accountants of Canada.

We apply CPA Canada's Canadian Standard on Quality Control 1. Our staff comply with the independence and ethical requirements of the Chartered Professional Accountants of Nova Scotia Code of Conduct.

Appendix 1 – Recommendations and Management Responses

Recommendation 1

Halifax Fire should develop and implement detailed plans, with timelines, to meet fire inspection obligations.

Management Response

Agree.

HRFE has developed a sustainable organizational chart and job descriptions to address the challenges in completing the mandated fire inspections. These changes are being negotiated with the Union and the timelines and plans are contingent upon negotiations of the new positions and structure. HRFE will document and communicate the plan when negotiations are complete.

Our recent effort includes:

- development and implementation of a restructure of the Fire Prevention Division;
 - strategically divided work into new job positions.
 - introduced and implemented one of the new positions (qualified Fire Inspector) in 2019.
 - additional positions are being negotiated.
- creation of a new Memorandum of Understanding between Planning and Development and HRFE to align fire inspectors with fire inspections and building officials with M200 By-law inspections.
- ongoing reports of inspection performance to Council who sets the level of service through the AO and the budget process:
 - introduction of the Fire Safety Maintenance Inspection program; and
 - added 2 more Fire Inspectors 2020/21 Business Plan/budget process;

Immediate future efforts will include identification of specific goals and objectives for managerial staff (already added to mandates for 2022.)

HRFE will add additional staff positions in the 2021/2022 budget and business plans.

Recommendation 2

Halifax Fire should document and prioritize risks to the Fire Prevention Division's operations and take steps to mitigate as appropriate.

Management Response

Agreed.

HRFE is already working towards the accomplishment of this recommendation as part of the branch reorganization.

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Management Response

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HRFE will work with ICT and P&D to accomplish this recommendation.

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Recommendation 6

Halifax Fire should issue orders-to-comply, where appropriate, and maintain key correspondence related to fire inspections, for an appropriate retention period.

Management Response

Agreed.

HRFE will develop a list of key correspondence to be included in the inspection process.

Recommendation 7

When follow-up of limited-scope inspections must be escalated to fire inspection staff, Halifax Fire should determine and communicate follow-up timelines and monitor completion dates.

Management Response

Agreed.

HRFE recognized this issue and recently put into place a daily inspection report to identify referrals and will establish specific timelines to address this recommendation.

Recommendation 8

Halifax Fire should develop and implement a quality assurance process to monitor that fire inspections are properly completed and documented. This should include developing guidance to promote consistency across inspection staff, which should help facilitate the quality assurance process.

Management Response

Agreed.

HRFE will develop a documented quality assurance process that provides direction for supervisory staff to conduct a minimum number of fire inspection audits.

Recommendation 9

Halifax Fire should update its fire inspection policies and procedures and establish a regular review process to maintain them going forward.

Management Response

Agreed.

Recommendation 10

Halifax Fire should establish expectations for fire inspection staff productivity and provide staff with guidance on how to prioritize inspections and other duties.

Management Response

Agreed.

COVID impacted HRFE's ability schedule inspections over the past 18 months based on business's operational hours and staff safety. HRFE will continue to evaluate current inspection capabilities with the newly implemented fire inspector positions and the existing fire prevention officer positions and monitor productivity.

HRFE sets targets for all customer service-based inquiries which are regularly reported on and audited by staff in HRM's Corporate & Customer Services Business Unit. HRFE assigns fire inspection assignments for individual inspectors/officers that are sorted by risk.

HRFE has initiated a quarterly review process for all staff in the Fire Prevention Division.

Recommendation 11

Halifax Fire should develop concrete plans, with timelines, for fire inspection staff to receive sufficient training in a timely manner.

Management Response

Agreed.

HRFE is currently researching alternative training options to mitigate the challenges noted above.

Recommendation 12

Halifax Fire should develop performance indicators for the Fire Prevention Division, establish targets, and regularly monitor against them.

Management Response

Agreed.

HRFE will continue to identify and implement appropriate KPI's to report progress on meeting legislative and policy-based requirements to conduct inspections.

Recommendation 13

Halifax Fire should work with Planning and Development to address concerns regarding Halifax Fire's involvement in planning applications.

Management Response

Agreed.

HRFE is in the process of implementing a new structure change within the Fire Prevention Division that will include a designated Plans Examiner position which will be aligned with planning and development to address concerns around planning application and infrastructure development. HRFE has already started working closer with P&D and TPW.

Recommendation 14

Halifax Fire should develop a complete list of dry hydrant needs and determine how it will prioritize capital funding for these.

Management Response

Agreed.

HRFE is in the process of implementing a new structure change within the Fire Prevention Division that will include a designated Plans Examiner position which will work closely with P&D to identify communities with a requirement for a static water source for firefighting purposes.

The installation and maintenance of this infrastructure is funded through the capital budget approved by Council.

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