

Nova Scotia Firefighters School

Value-for-Money Audit

Nova Scotia Department of Municipal Affairs and
Department of Emergency Management

Final Report
July 2025



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Executive Summary

Executive Summary

The Value-for-Money Audit (VFMA) of the Nova Scotia Firefighters School (NSFS) was initiated in response to mounting concerns from across Nova Scotia's firefighting community.

Agreed to by the Board at the most recent AGM, the goal of the audit was to assess whether the NSFS was delivering effective and accountable services consistent with stakeholder and public expectations, occupational safety requirements, and the evolving training needs of firefighters throughout Nova Scotia. Its focus was the examination of five key areas:



Governance and Oversight



Accountability



Value for Money



Use of Public Funds



Oversight of Safety of Staff and Students

The review is being undertaken at a time when the school is not operational. The provincial grant from the Department of Municipal Affairs was suspended in 2024, and the Vehicle Insurance Levy funds, which flow through FSANS, were frozen in May 2025 until the Value For Money Audit is completed.

The VFMA takes place when there are a range of significant reviews underway in respect to emergency management and first responder services in Nova Scotia. These include a broader review of fire services across the province under the leadership of the Fire Services Association of Nova Scotia (FSANS), a recent review on policing services, and other pending reviews on EHS (Emergency Services) Assessment and Ground Search and Rescue.

To undertake this review, the audit team employed a comprehensive, mixed-methods approach. This included:

- Development of a transparent review framework detailing how the review would be conducted, shared with all parties.
- Undertaking a detailed document review of NSFS internal policies, Board meeting minutes, bylaws, safety practices, other related policies, audits, any available planning or budgeting documents, program and enrolment data, and the historical documentation and reports of third party investigators arising from the 2019 fatality at the NSFS.
- A research element, including completion of a jurisdictional scan to examine how other jurisdictions are approaching firefighter training, along with a benchmarking exercise.
- An extensive stakeholder outreach and engagement process through key informant interviews, focus sessions, and, as a value-added element, the design and deployment of three online surveys targeting Nova Scotia firefighters, fire service leadership and NSFS Board Directors.
- Data mapping of retrospective and current financial performance and an in-depth review of training certification pathways and accreditation standards.

The History

The historical roots of the NSFS trace back to 1967. It originally began under the name Nova Scotia Firefighters Training Association as a centralized and well-supported training institution that brought together municipalities and the provincial government in a collaborative model focused on firefighter training. A proactive initiative at the time, the NSFS was created to centralize and professionalize fire service training across the province.

The mission at the time of establishment was:

“To provide professional training and certification programs to improve the safety, effectiveness, and readiness of fire service personnel across Nova Scotia.”

The School was formalized as a non-profit organization operating under the Nova Scotia Societies Act with a Board of Directors comprising representation drawn from fire departments, training officers, and provincial government liaison persons, including Nova Scotia’s Fire Marshal.

The site of the NSFS was originally donated by the Halifax County Fire Chiefs’ Association, with provisions that it be transferred back should the School cease to exist. While fire school training infrastructure and props have been built out over the decades, the actual structure of the Board and its governance structure has remained largely unchanged, notwithstanding the significant changes in governance practices that have evolved over the almost six decades since its founding.

The founders and leaders at the time showed tremendous strategic foresight in establishing this facility. What started out as a collaborative model, over time, has been seriously eroded to the extent that, among stakeholders responding to the surveys undertaken during the VFMA, 70% ranked NSFS as the least effective training provider within Nova Scotia.

A Crisis of Confidence

Despite its historic role in serving the volunteer firefighter sector, as outlined in the report arising from the VFMA, the NSFS faces a crisis of confidence among stakeholders due to a variety of serious factors including:

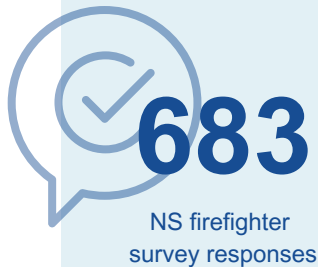
- Outdated infrastructure, much of which has fallen into disrepair,
- The unavailability of the mobile training unit, so highly valued by Nova Scotia firefighters, and so crucial as a training prop in the midst of a clear trend toward the regionalization of firefighter training, considering that 95% of Nova Scotia firefighters are volunteers,
- A general and pervasive unease among firefighters due to significant safety infractions including a preventable fatality,
- Growing competition from private providers,
- Notwithstanding the constraints of working under a non-profit model, the perceived slow and ineffective response of the NSFS Board and Executive Director to modernize the facility and meet emerging training demands, such as lithium-ion battery fires and large-scale energy storage and infrastructure incidents,
- Not effectively responding to stakeholders’ call for the inclusion of mental health, post-incident debriefing, and resilience training in curriculum renewal,
- Previous client organizations (e.g., fire departments) deciding to use their scarce training resources to actively create alternative training solutions, in response to the pervasive concern of the lack of attention to safety at the NSFS, and
- Mishandling of events and lack of transparency following a preventable tragic death.

Findings

The VFMA examined each of the five focus areas in detail.

The facts and evidence established during the VFMA was derived from material provided by the NSFS, survey data, key informant interviews, focus sessions with stakeholders, current and retrospective financial analyses, a best practices scan of other similar services across Canada and elsewhere, and targeted bi-lateral outreach and engagement. A key objective was to hear from firefighters and firefighter leadership throughout the province.

As a value-added exercise offered by the review team to secure stakeholder input, three online surveys were designed and deployed. These included a survey of Nova Scotia firefighters that received 683 responses, a survey of fire service leaders with 52 respondents, and a survey of NSFS Board Directors, to which almost all responded. An executive summary of these three surveys is included at Appendix B in this report. A separate detailed report on each of the surveys is included in a Volume II so that stakeholders can transparently review the results of input from fire service of Nova Scotia respondents.



Overall, the results of these surveys highlight that the NSFS is not viewed as a credible, safe, or responsive training provider by the majority of its stakeholders. Throughout the engagement, some stakeholders refer to the NSFS as ‘having lost its way.’ Based on the firefighter survey, 70% ranked NSFS as the least effective training provider; only 52% of respondents were satisfied overall.



The evidence and extensive open commentary by survey participants shows diminished confidence in the School. Trust in the institution has deteriorated significantly. Survey data collected through the audit underscores a loss of stakeholder confidence in the NSFS’s leadership, training quality, and communication practices. Many fire departments reported that they had reduced or discontinued their reliance on the school. Participants cited issues such as inconsistent issuance of certificates, a lack of responsiveness to inquiries, outdated course content, and a general perception of insularity and resistance to feedback. More broadly, the school is viewed as no longer fit for purpose and unable to respond to the evolving risks facing today’s firefighters, including battery-related fires, wildland urban interface incidents, and the mental health demands of modern service.

Governance

One of the most significant inflection points for the NSFS has been the failure to reform the governance structure and framework which, even in the assessment of the current Board Executive Committee and the Executive Director, has been dysfunctional for a long time. Notwithstanding, there has been no substantive change in Board structure or governance in more than 20 years.

The current governance model consists of twenty-nine (29) members which has not been fully constituted for many years. There are currently fourteen (14) vacancies with no evidence of a concerted effort at renewal until the VFMA was announced. And the fact that Directors on the General Board are leaving is a finding in itself. The Fire Marshal resigned from the Board in August 2024, to which he received no follow up from the Chair, Board Executive nor Executive Director. Nor was he encouraged to remain on the Board.

The Executive Committee of five (5) functions as the de facto governing authority. Stakeholders note, and the evidence shows, that this body lacks transparency and structured reporting. There is little evidence that this group operates under approved terms of reference or that its actions are consistently recorded or communicated to stakeholders. The Finance/Treasurer position on the Executive Committee has been vacant for several years.

This report examines the current, long-standing Board structure in detail, enumerating its significant gaps and shortcomings in respect of even acceptable governance practices.

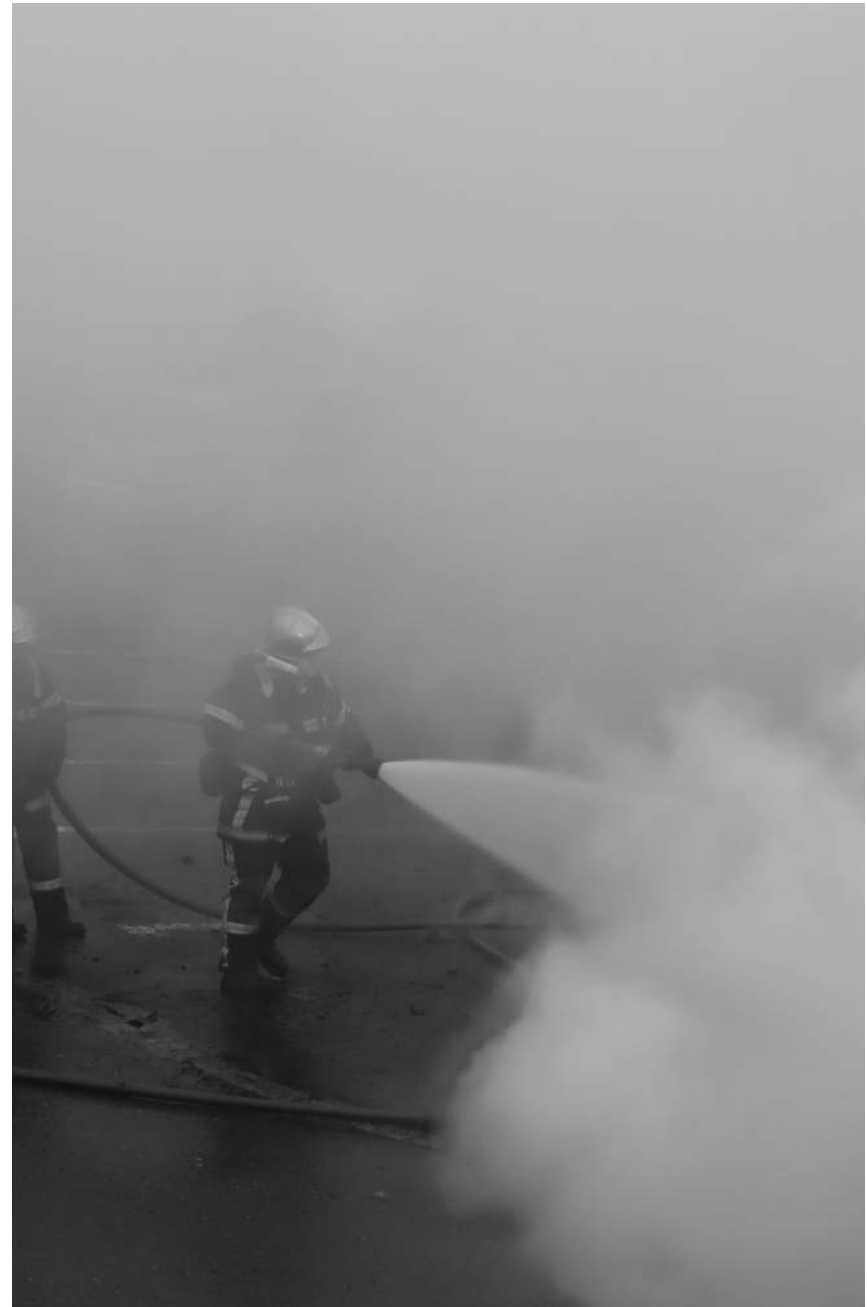
The role of the Executive Director is central to the audit's findings. The VFMA found that the Executive Director exercises significant operational control without any documented performance management framework or oversight mechanism. There are no formal performance appraisals, strategic or operational plans against which to measure progress, no evaluation or ongoing performance assessment, or documented delegation of authority from the Board.

This concentration of power, in the absence of structural checks and balances, contributes to systemic opacity and undermines the principles of good non-profit governance. Notably, the organization lacks foundational policies such as a whistleblower protection protocol or a comprehensive risk management plan. While committees are listed, there are no terms of reference, members have not been appointed and there is no reporting. Since 2016, there have been nine (9) Board meetings, eight (8) of which have been annual general meetings.

Expected committees, such as Finance and Audit, Safety and Oversight and Training that are considered essential for any entity engaged in high-risk operations like firefighter training, do not presently exist.

Aggregated findings of the VFMA in relation to governance include:

- There is a clear record of **serious policy gaps**, as well as specific **challenges in the safety culture** of the NSFS.
- The **board structure needs to be completely re-engineered**. The report offers suggestions.
- There are **no committee structures**, including a Safety and Oversight Committee and Training Committee, as originally envisaged by the founders.
- **Bylaws require updating** to clarify roles, to emphasize ‘safety’ and to model contemporary best practices in non-profit governance. Notably, there is not a single reference to ‘safety’ in the 2016 bylaws under which the NSFS operates, and these have yet to be filed with the Registry of Joint Stock Companies.
- **Performance evaluation and performance management** needs to be taken seriously at the Board level, for the Board itself, the Executive Director and for school programming overall.
- **Planning and monitoring is required** – there is no strategic plan, annual integrated budget and business plans are not prepared, and annual reporting to stakeholders is virtually non-existent.



Accountability

Assessing accountability in organizations involved in high-risk activities like firefighter training, particularly those incorporated under the Nova Scotia *Societies Act*, needs to be framed within the context of specific expectations and best practice measures that signal strong accountability to stakeholders. These expectations are heightened due to the inherent risks, public funding, and trust placed in such institutions.

The evidence generated through the VFMA points to the NSFS not handling legal and regulatory compliance well. This is particularly evident in the recent past, with the event of the fatality. The NSFS's poor handling of the fatality and its aftermath has caused irreparable reputational damage from which, as evidenced by the VFMA, the School has not recovered.

Incredibly, during the VFMA, stakeholders from the fire services community in Nova Scotia reported hearing about the fatality on the news.

There is no evidence that either the NSFS Executive Director or the Board Chairperson precipitated an internal investigative review within the School following the fatality. Under the circumstances, this would have been expected to have been initiated either by the Chair of the Executive Committee or the Executive Director through intercessions with the Board. A plenary Board meeting was not scheduled. Crisis communications resources were not brought in to assist in managing the resulting fallout.

To assign the most favourable attribution of these governance shortcomings to current and recent past Executive Board members and senior staff leadership, the kindest interpretation would be categorized as **benign neglect**, in bringing critically needed change to the governance of this important community asset.

When the NSFS was found guilty of offences by the Court in relation to the death of the young firefighter, Skyler Blackie, the creative sentencing model was applied. Part of the Court sentence included the requirement to deliver a presentation to three audiences on the tragic event. When delivered as this model intends, it has been lauded as having the ability to transform a punitive moment into a potentially transformative one.



In this case, the NSFS chose to hire an external third party to develop the presentation. A third party also delivered it to the three audiences, one of which was the Executive Board itself. The opportunity to deeply acknowledge the wrongdoing and for NSFS leadership to speak about how such a tragedy could have been prevented in a way that authentically, and without excuse, accepted responsibility could have served to build trust and the NSFS's reputation. This opportunity was not taken up by the NSFS leadership.

Furthermore, the content of presentation, while acknowledging responsibility for wrongdoing, appears to be victim blaming and attempts to excuse the institution of responsibility.

When tested against the usual range of measures that constitute strong accountability under the Nova Scotia *Societies Act*, the NSFS is found wanting in significant ways that are detailed in the analysis. To demonstrate strong accountability, particularly in a high-risk training environment like firefighter training, foundationally and without exception an organization must steward to:

- Maintenance of rigorous safety oversight,
- Transparent governance in operations,
- Responsiveness to stakeholders, and
- Going beyond the legal minimums of the Societies Act to build and maintain public trust.

When some of the findings of eroded trust and concern for safety were shared with the Executive Board and the Executive Director, their perspective is that this erosion of confidence has been caused by activism and negative media reports generated in respect to the fatality. However, this is not borne out in fact. Rather, the data and evidence points to many factors in stakeholder concerns beyond the obvious issue of the NSFS safety culture.

For the NSFS, the hill to climb is steeper in generating goodwill and confidence among stakeholders considering past practices and the governance failures and deficiencies identified in the VFMA.

Transparency

In response to a request from the Blackie family for financial statements and the School's bylaws, NSFS leadership wrote:

"...Regarding your request for access to the bylaws, financial statements and annual reports of the NSFS, I regret to inform you that we are currently unable to fulfill this request. ...Should circumstances change, or if the requested documents become available, we will notify you promptly".

Email from NSFS leadership to Mr. and Mrs. Blackie, October 22, 2024

Value-for-Money and Use of Public Funds

As part of this review, a comprehensive data and information request was submitted to the NSFS to support the VFMA. The request covered a wide range of operational, financial and performance-related data, including training delivery metrics, course participation and outcomes, instructor capacity, financial records, staffing compensation, measuring outcomes and results and procurement practices.

Receiving this information was significantly delayed with many aspects of the requested information arriving near the end of the actual audit process, being incomplete and during report writing. Some documents appeared to have been prepared very recently.

While the NSFS Executive Director uploaded background information to the shared drive (in three sessions over the course of two weeks), as in other information requests, at the time of writing, a number of information gaps remain.

This aspect of the VFMA examined the overall financial performance of the NSFS including revenue trends, revenue credibility and volatility, program delivery and cost recovery, expenditures and value for money, capital and infrastructure, staffing, compensation trends, financial history (2018-2024), membership trends and viability, enrollment and cost per student analysis.

Summary insights as a result of the analysis include the following:

- While total expenses have declined over the review period, the scale of financial reductions has not matched the sharper decline in revenue.
- Discretionary spending (e.g., travel, publications) appears fragmented and inconsistently managed.
- Payroll remains the largest cost driver, though is stable overall. There are, however, some disturbing trends including slow and uneven wage growth for frontline roles, wage-based positions such as Senior Instructors and Instructors. In contrast, the Executive Director's salary increased by over 60% in the past decade, from \$95,517 in 2016 to \$153,907 in 2025. This growth far exceeds that of most other positions, particularly instructional and maintenance roles. While some compensation growth is expected, the pace and scale of executive increases warrant review, particularly in the absence of clearly articulated performance benchmarks or organizational growth indicators and job presence factors, as referenced below.
- Maintenance, insurance, and WCB costs are trending upward, likely driven by risk exposure and aging infrastructure.
- Program delivery costs, particularly for training, have fallen sharply, reinforcing concerns about NSFS's ability to deliver on its core mandate if funding remains flat. These patterns suggest a need to clarify cost structures, modernize procurement and delivery systems, and assess which functions are core to NSFS's future mandate.

The implications of the comprehensive financial review are noteworthy.

Overall, the analysis reveals a steady and then sharp decline in enrollment volumes after 2018, with course offerings narrowing and fewer participants engaging in the school's programs. When analyzed alongside NSFS's financial statements, this enrollment record highlights a growing disconnect between stable or rising costs and shrinking training delivery, raising concerns about operational efficiency, program breadth, and long-term sustainability. It also may reflect the trend toward regionalization of training and/or the growing discomfort with the price and results of the training provided by the NSFS.

One concern repeatedly heard through the engagement process was the amount of time spent by the Executive Director on activities related to other bodies with which he is associated and has accepted leadership roles, specifically, the International Fire Service Accreditation Congress (IFSAC) and ProBoard. Data on days spent related to these accreditation bodies amounts to 17.6 days per year for the last 10 years. The number of days committed to this work increased over the last 3 years with 23 days in 2022, 30 days in 2023 and 25 in 2024.

With more than 10% of the working days of the Executive Director devoted to non-core NSFS leadership activities, presumably, this time could have been spent on activities to more quickly and efficiently address the numerous deficiencies noted from various authorities (Occupational Health and Safety [OHS], Fuel Services, Private Career Colleges [PCC] Division of the Department of Advanced Education) and the work required to bring the NSFS back into good standing.

This is considered a failure in the governance and oversight of the Executive Board.

The accreditation and certification regime was also given considerable attention by stakeholders during the review process. Considering the potential for a broad range of system changes arising from the fire services review, it may be time to reconsider Nova Scotia's buy-in to the somewhat arcane hegemonic approach to accreditation which is based out of two organizations in the U.S. While adherence to NFPA standards and credentialing to support portability of firefighter skills is noted as important features of the approach, some drawbacks such as the need for a Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition component, were highlighted. It may be time for a new look at the accreditation approach, particularly with such strengths in the post-secondary education sector.



Safety

In a firefighter school, having a strong safety culture is foundational to success – for the fire fighter and for the public. It's not just important, it's mission critical. Most importantly, it needs to be imbued in every aspect of firefighter training.

Firefighting is inherently dangerous. Even during training, students face significant physical and environmental risks. They are exposed to live fire situations with hazardous materials and heavy equipment that must perform every time. A strong safety culture helps prevent avoidable incidents.

The most serious findings relate to safety oversight, particularly considering the death of Skyler Blackie during a live fire training exercise in 2019. The audit revealed that NSFS undertook no formal internal review following the incident, nor did it respond meaningfully to inquiries from the deceased trainee's family, who were denied access to basic documents such as bylaws and financial statements.

In the subsequent third-party investigations, significant deficiencies in safety practices, safety culture and infrastructure were identified. Repeated visits by OSH inspectors from the Department of Labour over a five-year period and deficiencies in NSFS's OSH programming, as identified by an external reviewer, Safety Services Nova Scotia (SSNS), served to demonstrate a lethargy and lack of urgency surrounding safety matters.

This latter review, conducted in 2024, identified **41 safety deficiencies**, including **22 rated as high-risk**. These included non-compliance with NFPA 1403 standards for live fire training, outdated or unsafe training props, and the absence of current standard operating procedures. The Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration subsequently issued another compliance order.

Safety concerns persist to this day as underscored by an August 2024 sanction under the Private Career Colleges administration which suspended approval for the NSFS to offer pre-employment training for firefighters seeking a career in the sector. Not only does the loss of this

programming undermine the value for money provided to the School, it also has not been communicated to potential students on the School's website. The website signals that the dates for the next intake are to be announced. This lack of transparency impedes the ability of much-needed prospective firefighters to gain their training by seeking other avenues to build their skills.

Overall, these third-party assessments signal a clear failure to meet occupational health and safety requirements and a breakdown in the school's duty of care.

The VFMA finds that the NSFS only responded meaningfully to safety concerns when forced to do so by external regulators and did so slowly and without the sense of urgency required relative to addressing shortcomings.

This reactive posture is emblematic of broader leadership failures and an organizational culture that has become detached from accountability and stakeholder engagement. The case study related to the 2019 fatality underscores the importance of proactive safety management and situates the NSFS's failings as part of a wider governance breakdown.

"The NSFS has historically been a cornerstone in delivering foundational training for fire departments across the province. However, its current value is deeply compromised. The recent training-related fatality, combined with a long-standing pattern of poor transparency, weak leadership, and lack of institutional accountability, has caused many departments to question the school's role and relevance.

Until substantial reforms are undertaken, the NSFS cannot be considered a reliable or safe partner in firefighter training."

Stakeholder engaged for VFMA

Conclusions and Options

The VFMA of the NSFS is being undertaken in a very dynamic environment.

At the time of this writing, the NSFS is not currently operational. As a result, previously scheduled near-term training has been postponed. Notwithstanding the dynamism of the current environment, considering the overarching FSANS-led review of Nova Scotia's fire services and other factors related to emergency management, there is an interest in ensuring there is ongoing firefighter training available to Nova Scotia firefighters, if only on a pro tem basis.

Also, as was evident in discussions with stakeholders during the VFMA, there has been a strong call for a more focused role for the province in Nova Scotia's fire service. Stakeholders are looking to the broader fire service review with hope that it will lead to new legislation, clear regulatory and oversight authority, defined minimum mandatory qualifications for firefighters, and a responsive certification regime.

The VFMA Report is being tabled at a time when the broader fire service review has not been completed. A report on policing in Nova Scotia has also recently been tabled and there are pending reviews on EHS Emergency Services, and Ground Search and Rescue. These comprehensive reform initiatives provide the opportunity to reimagine a broader approach to emergency services training and certification. A 'hub and spoke' training model, often referenced in the survey, is one which could address both the need for a centralized location with its anticipated higher cost of infrastructure, while also being inclusive of regional delivery possibilities. Regional training is highly desired by volunteer firefighters and the municipalities which have shown strong leadership in developing their fire service response capacity.

In the meantime though, the ongoing need for firefighter training is real and growing. Being able to access appropriate training without delays or extended gaps in availability is important.



Based on the result of VFMA, the NSFS cannot safely and effectively operate as it is currently constituted and with the crisis of confidence that prevails among stakeholders in respect to its current leadership at both the Executive Committee and Executive Director levels. Even if the many shortcomings and governance gaps were addressed, reviving the NSFS may not satisfy the safety concerns and loss of trust experienced by stakeholders and clients.

Considering this factor, until final decisions are able to be taken in relation to the overall fire services review, an interim training model could be established to ensure continuity of firefighter training. As other provinces have done, this may involve forging new partnerships within Nova Scotia or Atlantic Canada as an interim or longer-term solution.

This option could include redirecting currently withheld and future grant funding away from the NSFS to another firefighter training entity on a short term or longer-term basis or as a partnership arrangement for contracted services related to completion of previously scheduled training and, potentially, ongoing training.

Each of these possible directions requires re-thinking of the governance structures and tools, facility planning and management, instructor recruitment and training, onboarding tools for staff and students with a sharp and abiding focus on safety, existing partnerships and forging new ones, building stakeholder engagement and trust. Each of these elements must be on the menu for any path forward.

Firefighters have been clear on the improvements they need:

- Safety First, Always
- Better Access and Availability
- More Qualified and Consistent Instructors
- Cost Reduction and Funding Support
- Governance and Oversight Reform
- Standardization Across Nova Scotia
- Modern Facilities and Realistic Scenarios
- Flexible, Modular Delivery
- Culture and Leadership Reform
- Inclusivity and Volunteer Recognition

Source: VFMA Firefighters Survey

Closing Comments

The review team owes a debt of gratitude to the stakeholders who gave so generously of their time during completion of the VFMA. Their appetite for change, their enthusiasm and candour were refreshing. Their ideas were progressive, yet, realistically, also captured the myriad challenges. Their dedication to the profession is unassailable.

We are also grateful to FSANS and The Atlantic Provinces Professional Fire Fighters Association (APPFFA) for the help and guidance of their members throughout the review.

The review team also appreciated the opportunity to speak to the Blackie family who welcomed us into their home and who, in the midst of their continuing pain, shared their thoughtful insights into the importance of fundamental reform at the NSFS and in the fire service as a whole.

In completing this audit, an important conclusion the review team was left with is the enthusiastic desire to see Nova Scotia's overall fire service change and improve. Volunteer and career firefighters were equally effusive in their advocacy and relish for it.





1 Introduction

1.1 Background to the Nova Scotia Firefighter School Value-for-Money Audit

This report presents the results of the Value-for-Money Audit (VFMA) of the Nova Scotia Firefighters School (NSFS). The review was initiated in response to a growing range of serious concerns regarding its governance, accountability, performance, safety culture and present value proposition in relation to firefighter training in Nova Scotia.

The VFMA was mandated to examine five key areas:



Governance and Oversight



Accountability



Value for Money



Use of Public Funds



Oversight of Safety of Staff and Students

The review is being undertaken at a time when the School is not operational. The provincial grant from the Department of Municipal Affairs was suspended in 2024, and the Vehicle Insurance Levy funds, which flow through FSANS, were frozen in May 2025 until the Value For Money Audit is completed.

The VFMA is also being conducted concurrently with a separate overarching review of province's fire service system [1], including issues related to system-level governance. This overarching review is being conducted by the Fire Service Association of Nova Scotia (FSANS). Its focus is to ensure that the fire services are not only equipped to handle current challenges but are also structured in a way that is adaptable to future needs, ensuring better service for all communities and enhancing

[1] FSANS

overall safety.

In undertaking the VFMA, the focus has been on gathering the data and evidence respecting the school's fit for purpose and overall performance. It has also included a research and benchmarking exercise and a multi-faceted engagement process with hundreds of stakeholders across Nova Scotia's fire service community.

Responsive to a broad range of firefighter and public concerns, including a preventable, tragic training-related fatality in 2019, this analysis finds that trust and confidence in the NSFS has been significantly eroded.

This report focuses on identifying and clarifying performance gaps to illuminate viable pathways forward related to firefighter training and certification in Nova Scotia, while recognizing the dynamism of the current environment. Its observations and conclusions are based on the data and evidence gathered during the review and informed by the voices of Nova Scotia's firefighting volunteers and career firefighters.

As will be detailed in the analysis relating to the five key areas of focus in this VFMA, there are significant policy gaps and a lack of up-to-date, comprehensive information at the NSFS; information that one would ordinarily expect to find in a well-functioning organization.

The documents that were uploaded by the NSFS to the shared drive established by the review team were often dated, sometimes empty and without a great amount of detail. As a result, the review team had to expand its research and engagement to fill in as many of the gaps and missing information as possible. In addition, the documents that were uploaded were often late in being presented with many arriving as the report was being written. This challenge added significantly to the complexity of the VFMA.

In addition to this summary report, the review team has prepared a second volume containing the processed results of the three online surveys that were undertaken as part of an extensive engagement process (the Executive Summaries of the three survey reports are included as an Appendix B to this, the final report).

1.2 Background on NSFS - History and Mandate

As is often a point of pride for institutions like the NSFS, the School did not present a detailed history of the organization. What is available is very high level and mostly on the NSFS's website. Our additional research filled in some of the missing pieces.

The NSFS has been in operation since **1967**, originally under the name **Nova Scotia Firefighters Training Association**. A proactive initiative at the time, the NSFS was created to centralize and professionalize fire service training across the province.

The 'objects' of the School are noted in the adjoining Figure 1. Prior to its creation, fire departments across Nova Scotia operated without a coordinated approach to training. There was a recognized need for a **centralized institution to provide uniform, high-quality training** for both career and volunteer firefighters.

The primary motivation behind its establishment was the increasing complexity of fire suppression and rescue operations, responding to concerns at the time related to firefighter safety and the perceived need to standardize firefighter training.

The **mission** at the time of establishment was:

“To provide professional training and certification programs to improve the safety, effectiveness, and readiness of fire service personnel across Nova Scotia.”

Over time, this mission evolved into a more structured institutional mandate focusing on:

- Delivering accredited fire service education,
- Supporting municipal and volunteer fire departments, and
- Promoting best practices in fire suppression, rescue, and emergency response.

At the outset, foundational support came from:

- The Nova Scotia Department of Municipal Affairs,
- Municipal fire service associations, and
- Support from provincial fire marshals and fire chiefs.

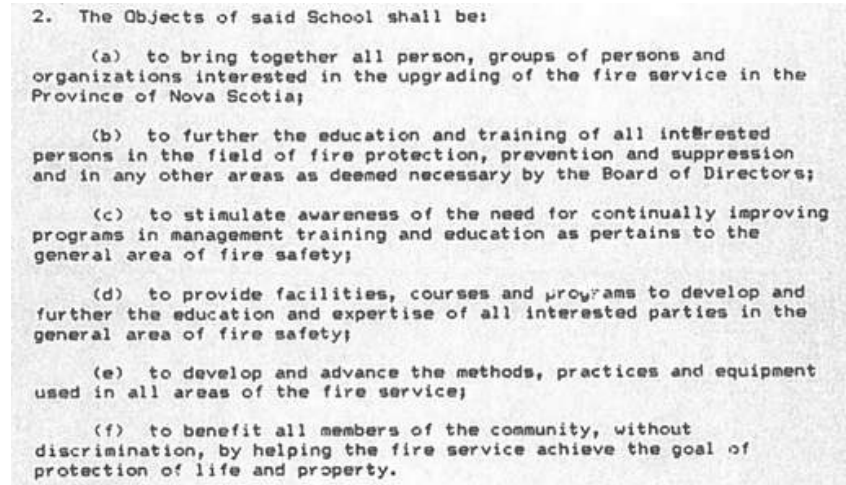


Figure 1: Objects of the Nova Scotia Firefighter School in Section 2 a-f of the 1993 Bylaws

The School was eventually formalized as a **non-profit organization governed by a Board of Directors**, with representation drawn from fire departments, training officers, and provincial government liaison persons.

The primary training facility for the NSFS is located on Powder Mill Lake in Waverley. The facility consists of one main building with a training auditorium, offices, and a lunchroom. There are dorm rooms, drying tower, and a two-bay station for fire apparatus.

The fire ground consists of two portable classrooms, fire pump house, maintenance storage facility and fire extinguisher storage building.

Live training areas include a Burn Tower and Pad, a Class A concrete burn building, vehicles, mock flange, and a helicopter prop. There is a second concrete building called the "smoke house" for non-live fire evolutions (practical training exercises) and is used mostly by police agencies.

While fire school training infrastructure and props have been built out over the decades, the actual structure of the Board and its governance structure has remained largely unchanged, notwithstanding the significant changes in governance practices that have evolved over the almost six decades since its founding.

The site of the NSFS at Powder Mill Lake was originally donated by the Halifax County Fire Chiefs' Association. Within the 1993 Bylaws, there is a provision in the 'Special Conditions' associated with this transfer that if, at any time, the Nova Scotia Firefighter School ceases to exist as primarily a firefighters training school, the Halifax County Fire Chiefs' Association would have the first option to acquire, at no charge, the buildings, equipment, and other assets of the Association that were in place at the time of the initial changeover, as well as to acquire at book value all other assets of the school that were acquired subsequent to the changeover. In this context the *Societies Act* is quite prescriptive on the steps that need to be taken if a non-profit society dissolves. This guidance, in tandem with the above reference excerpt from the 1993 NSFS Bylaws, would dictate the process to be followed.

During the VFMA, the review team was told that the 1993 Bylaws had been replaced by new Bylaws in 2016. Later in reviewing documents uploaded by the NSFS during the VFMA, the review team learned that NSFS staff had 'recently [late 2024] learned that any changes made to the Bylaws since 1995 haven't been filed officially with the Registry of Joint Stocks meaning that technically the School is to be functioning off those ones [the 1993 Bylaws]''[2]. This wasn't recognized by the Board or Executive Director until October 2024. The VFMA found that the School was not compliant with their regular filings with the Registry of Joint Stock Companies for a period of ~ 9 years, so, it's not surprising that the 2016 Bylaws were not officially filed.

In this context, the *Societies Act* is quite prescriptive on the steps that need to be taken if a non-profit society dissolves. This guidance, in tandem with the above reference excerpt from the 1993 NSFS Bylaws, would dictate the process to be followed.



[2] Nova Scotia Firefighters School – Minutes of Executive Meeting October 10, 2024.

1.3 Current Snapshot of Firefighter Training in Nova Scotia

In terms of the overall governance and management of its fire services, Nova Scotia is unique among Canadian provinces. It does not have a specific legislated mandate for its fire services. Presently, responsibility for the fire service is shared across several departments of the Government of Nova Scotia including the Office of the Fire Marshal (now under the Department of Municipal Affairs), Department of Natural Resources and Renewables, and the Department of Labour (Occupational Health and Safety).

As a result, there is presently not a single, authoritative governance and oversight framework. This is an area that is the key focus of the separate overarching review of fire services presently underway in Nova Scotia. The engagement process undertaken during the VFMA clearly indicated that it is also a prominent issue for Nova Scotia firefighters at this time.

Nationally, the jurisdictional scan undertaken as part of the VFMA finds that fire services in other provinces have a specific legislative mandate with explicit inclusion and regulatory oversight for firefighter training.

Within this context, key relevant features of the NS's current fire service landscape include:

300+

~300+ service points/departments comprise the NS fire service.

~95%

Approximately 95% of Nova Scotia firefighters are volunteers, many of whom have traditionally relied on the NSFS for basic and ongoing training.



Training for municipally supported career firefighters has generally been managed internally and certified through the Nova Scotia Fire Service Professional Qualifications Board [3] (NSFSPQB) for testing and certification.



NSFS operates as a non-profit under the Societies Act and is also registered as a private career college (PCC) under the Nova Scotia *Private Career Colleges Act*.

[3] <https://nsfspqb.ca/>



NSFS training is underpinned by national standards – National Fire Protection Association [4] (NFPA) – and its certification testing is managed by the NSFSPQB, which is presently chaired by the NSFS Executive Director. Proctors to support NSFSPQB testing are provided by the NSFS. The NSFSPQB received its initial accreditation from IFSAC [5] in 2001 and the Proboard [6] in 2004. To maintain this accreditation, the NSFSPQB must comply with their respective requirements, including an audit every five years.



As revealed through the VFMA, training for firefighters in Nova Scotia is changing. An increasing number of municipalities, beyond the larger urban centres like Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) and Cape Breton Regional Municipality (CBRM), are managing their own training. Among others, these include Truro, Yarmouth, Pictou, and Barrington. These municipal departments in Nova Scotia are conducting firefighter training independently, also using the NFPA standards with training certification sought through the NSFSPQB.



Beyond this trend of fire service organizations arranging their own training, it was clear through input from stakeholders during the VFMA engagement process that one of the salient trends presently being seen in Nova Scotia is the growing importance on regionalization of training. This makes a lot of sense, particularly for the volunteer firefighter cohort who may find it difficult to always travel to the School and for whom resources related to travel and associated expenses are not always available.

[4]Standards Guide_1021_1407.pdf

[5] IFSAC

[6]The Pro Board

How Training and Certification is Delivered

ON	The Office of the Fire Marshal directly oversees certification of firefighters in ON. Training is delivered through a mix of public and private providers, including the Ontario Fire College which operates under the Office of the Fire Marshall and five regional training centers under provincial standards.
MB	Certification of firefighters in MB is overseen by the Fire Commissioner. Training is centrally delivered through the Manitoba Emergency Services College under the Office of the Fire Commissioner.
BC	The Office of the Fire Commissioner sets province-wide minimum standards for structural firefighter training and municipalities confirm local training complies with provincial standards. Training is delivered through a mix of private and public providers.
NS	There is no mandatory provincial certification for firefighters. The Office of the Fire Marshal has no enforceable statutory power to certify firefighters or training institutions. The Fire Safety Act does provide the Office of the Fire Marshal with some authority to set standards.

In the past, the NSFS has been able to satisfy this need through use of its mobile burn unit. Regrettably, this unit has not been available for use since late 2018 and is presently parked at the School facility. It requires significant refurbishment (reportedly estimated at ~\$200-\$400,000) for which no viable plan was presented during the VFMA. As was found through stakeholder interviews and the online survey of firefighters, the fact that the NSFS mobile unit is no longer deployed is seen as a significant challenge throughout the province. It is also creating competitive forces with private companies filling the void with mixed reviews, in terms of quality of training, as identified through the engagement process.

The fact that many fire service organizations are taking training into their own hands and the growing preference for regionalized services underscores the perception of the declining value proposition of the NSFS, a significant finding which has clear implications for the School going forward.



1.3.1 A Crisis of Confidence

Despite its historic role in serving the volunteer firefighter sector, as will be revealed in this report, the NSFS faces a crisis of confidence due to a variety of serious factors including:

- Outdated infrastructure, much of which has fallen into disrepair,
- The unavailability of the mobile training unit, as noted above,
- A general and pervasive unease among firefighters due to significant safety infractions
- Growing competition from private providers,
- Slow response by NSFS to modernize and meet emerging training demands, such as lithium-ion battery fires and large-scale energy storage and infrastructure incidents, Stakeholders calling for the inclusion of mental health, post-incident debriefing, and resilience training in curriculum renewal,
- Previous client organizations deciding to use their scarce resources to actively create alternative training solutions, responding to the pervasive concern of the lack of attention to safety at the NSFS, and
- Mishandling of events following a preventable tragic death.

Following the investigation, court proceedings and by the NSFS's own analysis, the fatality was deemed a preventable incident. It has been a salutary moment for the NSFS, focusing the spotlight on the NSFS's operations. As confirmed through the extensive engagement undertaken through the VFMA, for many Nova Scotia firefighters, this tragedy and the manner in which it was handled has reduced their confidence in the School. The conclusion is that, by any measure, this incident was poorly handled by both the Board and the Executive Director.

In the subsequent investigations, significant deficiencies in safety practices, safety culture and infrastructure were identified. Repeated visits by OSH inspectors from the Department of Labour Skills and Immigration (LSI) over a five-year period and deficiencies in NSFS's OSH programming, as identified by an external reviewer, Safety Services Nova Scotia (SSNS), served to demonstrate a lethargy and lack of urgency surrounding safety matters.

Safety concerns persist to this day as underscored by an August 2024 sanction under the Private Career Colleges administration which suspended approval for the NSFS to offer pre-employment training for firefighters seeking a career in the sector.



1.4 NSFS Core Programming and Stakeholder Assessment

The NSFS offers a broad range of training courses for firefighters. These include:

- Level I and Level II Firefighter Training,
- Advanced and Specialty Courses including Haz Mat, Vehicle Extraction, Ice Rescue and Chain Saw use,
- Fire Service Instructor Courses,
- Officer Courses including Media Relations and Incident Command, and
- Industrial Courses.

Based on the engagement process undertaken during the VFMA, the most common training courses taken by firefighters at the NSFS have been:

- Firefighter I and II are the most frequently cited core certification,
- Hazardous Materials (HazMat),
- Incident Command (ICS 100/200) and Leadership (Fire Officer I/II),
- Vehicle Extrication, Medical First Responder (MFR),
- Ice/Water/Boat Rescue, Confined Space, and Technical Rescue.

As a firefighter training school, as can be seen above, the NSFS has had the capacity to offer a wide diversity of courses and programming. Stakeholders generally highly value this feature. There are, however, emerging firefighter training needs that have been identified as important training areas for contemporary firefighters. Survey respondents feel the School has been slow to advance these important emerging training. These include dealing with lithium-ion battery fires and fires associated with renewable energy infrastructure, including wind turbines, as well as issues related to wildfire and urban interface (WUI), high buildings, floodwater, crane/towers, and other dangerous rescue missions, exacerbated by climate change and extreme weather events. Securing trained instructors and equipment for these significant training needs has also been identified as a challenge for the NSFS.

While more detail on the perception by stakeholders on NSFS Training will be addressed in the findings section of the VFMA, stakeholders report mixed results and satisfaction. Fifty-two percent (52%) rated their overall NSFS training experience as “good” or “excellent”. Highest scoring aspects were:

- Instructor Quality (59%)
- Hands-on Training (59%)

The weakest areas reported related to:

- Facilities & Equipment (46%)
- Value for Money (47%)

When compared with other training providers, municipal fire departments were most often ranked as the top training provider (47%) and the NSFS ranked lowest for effectiveness by 70% of respondents. Out-of-province providers (e.g., Justice Institute of British Columbia and Survival Systems) were seen as more modern and professional.

Key concerns stakeholders expressed with NSFS-provided training included:

- Concerns in respect to safety culture,
- Concerns in relation to the qualifications of instructors,
- Outdated equipment and poor facilities,
- Lack of alignment between what was taught in the classroom session and test questions during certification exams, particularly as it relates to HazMat training, with no change or extension in the amount of instruction despite repeated examples of students struggling with the study portion of that important course, and
- Lack of responsiveness and governance issues – specific issues cited included missed paperwork (courses completed but certificates not issued), lack of follow-up and poor communication.

Stakeholders also report a decline in quality at the NSFS. While older graduates generally speak more positively, recent trainees cite decreased standards and indicate a preference for internal or local in-house training to avoid the NSFS. These are not ringing endorsements. Deep detail is included in the separate summary report of the survey, undertaken as part of the VFM audit, completed by 683 firefighters across the province.

All organizations faced challenges during the global pandemic and the NSFS was no exception. At the Firefighter School, COVID heightened the need for blended training models, online and in-person, highlighting the need for online theory delivery. There was also an increased focus on regional delivery and mobile units which were well received.

Generally, stakeholders completing the detailed survey indicated an openness to flexible, modular approaches to meeting training needs, so the changes made by the NSFS during the pandemic are seen to be adaptable to post-pandemic training needs.



As a non-profit, the NSFS has developed revenue generating training products to augment funding. Pre-Employment Training for those seeking employment in the fire service is one of those initiatives. The views of stakeholders on NSFS pre-employment training are divided:

- Some fire departments report that they no longer send recruits due to trust issues,
- While the metrics on success rates of graduates attaching to fire service organizations were not provided, stakeholders expressed skepticism of its value in leading to attachment.
- Municipal recruitment programs are preferred by stakeholders for their professionalism and job relevance,
- In this context, NSFS is often categorized by stakeholders as a “default” or “only option,” not by preference,
- Other stakeholders highlighted better success and relevance with in-house or out-of-province recruit training.
- Some stakeholders expressed concern that courses were being taught by instructors who were not successful in gaining full-time employment with municipal units, further eroding faith in quality of instruction and
- Other programming designed to augment revenues focuses on the industrial and marine sectors. While NSFS leadership spoke positively about the success of these initiatives, stakeholders commented that these endeavours took a disproportionate amount of attention away from core programming for Nova Scotia firefighters.

1.4.2 Suspension of Programming due to Safety Concerns

The NSFS is registered as a training institution under the authority of Nova Scotia's *Private Career Colleges Act* [7] (PCC). This enables potential students to seek student loans to pursue the training that is regulated by the PCC. NSFS's Pre-Employment Program operates under this authority.

In August 2024, the PCC Director suspended its approval for the NSFS Pre-Employment Program. The PCC Director has the authority to revoke or suspend a program if considered necessary to protect students or the public interest.

The suspension indicated that the NSFS cannot admit students into the program until two conditions are addressed and satisfied. These are:

1. NSFS must confirm in writing that they have satisfied all occupational health and safety (OHS) Orders and the Order from the Fuel Services inspection team at LSI. This has not yet been completed and the issue regarding the NSFS's use of propane tanks remains restricted
2. The second requirement relates to a request for the NSFS to inventory all equipment, supplies and materials and certify that they have had an independent audit conducted to assess and confirm that same can be used for training purposes. This includes such things as meeting the maintenance and care requirements set out by the original equipment manufacturer.

At the time of this writing, the issuance of this order remains in force and the requirements have not been satisfied. This is a continuation of a troubling pattern that has characterized the NSFS's sluggish response to regulators, including OHS, since the fatality incident in 2019.

[7] [Private Career Colleges Act](#)

It is notable that the suspension of the Pre-Employment Program does not appear to be widely known by stakeholders. The minutes from the Executive Board Meeting of October 10, 2024, captured a summary of a report provided by the NSFS Executive Director. During this report the Executive Board were told that the NSFS had decided not to operate the Pre-Employment Program due to low enrolment. Further he added that HRM Fire does not accept the NSFS Pre-Employment Program and instead provides its own 16-week program. This comment appears to signal low enrolment is due to other options for firefighters. **The report to the Executive Committee does not speak to the School's inability to offer the program at this time because of the PCC Director's suspension order.**

Further, the NSFS website continues to profile the Pre-Employment Program as active, noting that dates for the next intake are to be announced. This lack of transparency could undermine the motivation and ability for much needed prospective firefighters to look elsewhere for training opportunities in a timely way, causing delays in access to trained personnel for fire service organizations.

With a mission originally established to be clearly focused on firefighter training, the NSFS's foray into a broader array of revenue generating products that go beyond firefighter training, while, perhaps, viewed as being necessary from a financial perspective, invites scrutiny of the very model under which the NSFS is incorporated.

As a non-profit organization, the NSFS has limited means to generate revenue and to invest in the renewal of existing equipment and facilities, as well as the ability to invest in new props and training aids. Considering the growing complexity of firefighting and fire safety, it raises the foundational question of whether a non-profit model is the best way to incorporate this critically important infrastructure, particularly, at a time when fire service training needs are growing in complexity and evolving in relation to the type of training required.

1.5 Key Findings

Presentation of key findings arising from the VFMA are presented in respect to the five key areas identified as the requirements of the audit of the NSFS. These include an examination of the following:

- Governance and Oversight
- Accountability
- Value for Money
- Use of Public Funds
- Oversight of Safety of Staff and Students

At the outset of the VFMA, a comprehensive review framework was developed. It includes a list of key documents being sought from the NSFS, as well as documents related to the fatality, the investigations that followed, the subsequent reports on progress toward addressing deficiencies, among other factors. This list of documents was expanded as the VFMA advanced (see **Appendix A**).

With an emphasis of focusing on data and evidence in the VFMA, inputs into key findings were derived from many sources arising from a comprehensive examination of the operations of the NSFS. These included:

Document review

These included an extensive array of documents and supplementary financial information requested of the NSFS. This component of the VFMA also included a review of the various reports of the investigations at the NSFS in the aftermath of the fatality. The document list is included in **Appendix A**.

Research

This included the following broad range of activities:

- A jurisdictional scan (national and global) with a focus on how firefighter training is conducted in Canada and beyond. This included a scan of legislative and regulatory environments, identifying models for closer examination. From a firefighter training and certification perspective, approaches in Ontario, Manitoba and British Columbia rose to the top as potentially worthy of emulation. The review team also examined international analogues and the trend to a more integrated approach to training related to emergency management including Guardian Centers [8] and Disaster City [9]. Considering the overarching fire services review, the recent report on policing in Nova Scotia as well as the reviews underway on EHS Emergency Services, Governance and Ground Search and Rescue, this more integrated approach to training emergency management personnel may be of interest in Nova Scotia going forward.
- Trends analysis in terms of emerging areas of focus in firefighter training including issues related to climate change impacts and extreme weather events, as well as wildfire/WUI, EV battery fires, mental health, HazMat, new materials in building construction and FF&E.
- Sentiment analysis (netnography) to track a broad range of input across multiple channels including social media, media, firefighter community responses through online surveys, among others.
- Mapping the complex approach to accreditation and certification of firefighters in Canada.

[8] [Disaster Preparedness and Tactical Training Center | Guardian Centers, LLC](#)

[9] [Disaster City® | TEEX.ORG](#)

Engagement

An extensive engagement process including:

- Bi-lateral interviews with the Executive Committee members of the NSFS Board, the Executive Director and senior instructors.
- Structured interviews with fire chiefs of the two largest firefighting employers, Halifax and Cape Breton regional municipalities, the President of FSANS, as well the certification manager with New Brunswick Office of the Fire Marshal who is also a member of the NS Fire Service Professional Qualifications Board
- Focus sessions with the FSANS Board and members and the Atlantic Provinces Professional Fire Fighters Association [10] (APFFFA) Board and members,
- Bi-lateral and focus sessions with government officials including the Office of the Fire Marshal (NS), senior officials of the PCC Division of the Department of Advanced Education, senior officials responsible for Safety and OHS under the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration (LSI), and officials of the Department of Municipal Affairs and the Department of Emergency Management
- Three online surveys were designed and deployed to Volunteer firefighters, Career firefighters, Fire Chiefs, Deputy Chiefs, training instructors and NSFS General Board members. Detailed reports on each of the surveys are included in Volume II. The Executive Summaries of each of these surveys is included in Appendix B in this final report.
- Meeting with the family of Skyler Blackie, and
- Participation from hundreds of respondents ensured a wide spectrum of views and allowed for quantitative analysis of attitudes, sentiment, satisfaction, and priorities.
- A site visit to the NSFS in Waverley.

This section of the report integrates findings from all these areas across each of the five key areas that are the focus of the VFMA.

As a backdrop to this in-depth examination, it is important to consider the tragic situation of the fatality that took place at the NSFS in March of 2019. This includes a high-level summary of what happened and its aftermath.

[10] (2) [Facebook](#)



Overview of Events Related to the Death of Skyler Blackie

What Happened

On March 9, 2019, 28-year-old firefighter Skyler Blackie was participating in a training/exam at NSFS when he used a rusted, expired fire extinguisher, donated by a refinery, during an exercise to demonstrate his mastery of the training prop. The extinguisher exploded, its bottom detaching and striking firefighter Blackie in the face, causing catastrophic brain injury. He died 11 days later.

Investigations

- Occupational Health & Safety (OHS) Investigation
 - The Labour Department's safety division launched an investigation shortly after the incident in 2019.
 - NSFS faced two charges under the Nova Scotia Occupational Health and Safety Act and pled guilty in April 2022.

Applying the 'creative sentencing' model, the court imposed a penalty totaling CA\$102,000, which included a fine, victim surcharge, and bursaries for volunteer firefighters. The NSFS was also required to prepare and deliver a presentation on what happened to three audiences.

• Independent Third-Party & OHS Audit

- NSFS was mandated to conduct a third-party review, resulting in 41 safety recommendations. Of these, 22 were classified as high-risk activities
- By mid-2024, the provincial Labour Department issued a compliance order targeting those 22 high-risk activities. In August 2024, they issued a stop-work order halting unsafe high-risk training until full compliance was demonstrated.

- The audit highlighted chronic issues including:
 - Lack of regular inspections and maintenance of donated equipment.
 - Inadequate record-keeping on extinguisher service.
 - A "rubber stamp" safety culture where known hazards were not corrected proactively

Private Career College Sanction Issued

In August 2024, the PCC Director suspended the Pre-Employment Program. The PCC Director has the authority to revoke or suspend a program if considered necessary to protect students or the public interest. The suspension indicated that the NSFS cannot admit students into the program until two conditions are addressed and satisfied.

These conditions have not been met by the NSFS at the time of this writing.

Case-Study Insights and Key Takeaways

- Safety Culture Failure: All gear must be inspected rigorously before use.
- Proactive vs. Reactive: NSFS reformed only after legal and regulatory pressure and have been slow to respond.
- Accountability Matters: Leadership integrity questioned publicly and broadly by fire service stakeholders.
- Governance Reform Needed: Governance failures are revealed through this audit which precipitate the need for enhanced oversight.
- Systemic Change: The overarching review of fire services in Nova Scotia that is currently underway may precipitate broader changes in the fire service.

In the NSFS's own incident report, while acknowledging responsibility for wrongdoing, the subtext appears to be victim blaming and attempts to excuse the institution of responsibility.

The image shows four workers in a forest, silhouetted against a bright sky. They are carrying equipment, including a long pole and a bag, and appear to be walking through the trees. The workers are wearing hard hats and carrying large backpacks. The forest is composed of tall, thin evergreen trees.

2 Governance and Oversight

The facts and evidence established during the VFMA was derived from survey data, interviews, current and retrospective analyses and targeted engagement. The evidence gathered points to a governance structure that has significant current and long-standing challenges.

Aggregating the findings from an extensive document review, key informant interviews, several focus sessions and from three online surveys, including a survey of Nova Scotia firefighters that received **683 responses**, the **NSFS is not viewed as a credible, safe, or responsive training provider by the majority of its stakeholders.**

In fact, some stakeholders refer to the NSFS as 'having lost its way'. Based on the survey, 70% ranked NSFS as the least effective training provider; only 52% of respondents were satisfied overall. The evidence shows diminished confidence in the School.

When these findings were shared with the Executive Committee of the Board and the Executive Director, their perspective is that this erosion in confidence has been caused by the activism and negative media reports generated in respect to the fatality. However, this is not borne out in fact. Rather, the data and evidence points to many factors in stakeholder concerns beyond the obvious issue of the NSFS' safety culture.

During the VFMA, the absence of critical hallmarks of effective governance at the NSFS was regularly advanced. This section of the VFMA identifies and explores these governance challenges.

The NSFS Board is widely acknowledged, including by its own leadership, to be dysfunctional and unrepresentative of the fire service it purports to serve.

Key observations related to governance are explored below under separate headings.

Leadership

The Executive Committee (EC) of the NSPS Board established at the May 2025 Annual General Meeting (AGM) told the VFMA team that in the month since their appointment they had identified a comprehensive range of 'governance' challenges related to the NSFS. They were acknowledged as 'long-standing'.

Subsequently, the EC submitted a detailed plan to address these challenges. The issues they identified mapped closely to the issues identified by the review team during the VFMA. Several of the current members of the NSFS Executive Committee of the Board are previous long standing Board members.

In the presence of an announcement of the VFMA at that same AGM, the rapid identification of what's wrong at the NSFS fails to pass any threshold of credibility and points to the need for the leadership change being sought by stakeholders consulted during the VFMA.

2.1 Memorandum of Association and By-Laws

The originating Memorandum of Association (MOA) and other documents establishing the Firefighter School were amended in 1993. The 1993 amendments to the original MOA advanced several changes including to the bylaws.

Near the end of the audit, as earlier mentioned, the review team learned that a new set of Bylaws were developed and adopted in 2016 but they were never officially filed. Because of this oversight, in our understanding, the 1993 Bylaws remain in effect.

Notwithstanding the NSFS leadership not officially filing the 2016 Bylaws, they have been operating since 2016 as if these latter bylaws are in effect. In this context, the comparison, from a governance perspective, of the two sets of bylaws is relevant. Notably, the 1993 bylaws are superior to the 2016 bylaws in four material ways:

- A more detailed outline of the structure of the Board, more procedurally rich and providing greater precision in defining associated roles and responsibilities.
- The 1993 bylaws mention refer to 'safety' many times and provide for Safety Committee. The 2016 bylaws do not include even one reference to 'safety' and there is no provision for a safety-related committee of the NSFS Board.
- The 1993 bylaws detail committee structures and provide terms of reference and the expectations of these respective committees. Notably, these include a Training Committee, the role of which was designated as being advisory in respect to firefighter training requirements – a feature that would be expected. This committee included five sub-committees, among them, first and foremost, a Safety Committee. In fact, the 1993 bylaws explicitly reference 'safety' many times in the MOA and in the bylaws. This committee structure has not been carried over into the 2016 bylaws and although the current template for the NSFS's annual general

meetings includes 'reports' from several committees (5), when questioned on this point, the NSFS Executive Director advised the review team that these committees have not been active since 2016 and do not report. Notably, one of these relates to 'training'. To have not activated this committee to provide guidance in firefighter training requirements as they evolve is a failure in leadership.

- The 1993 bylaws are more expansive in establishing governance expectations including frequency of Board meetings (explicitly referenced in the 1993 bylaws as every three months). By the NSFS' own reporting there has been a total of nine (9) Board meetings since 2016, eight (8) of these being AGMs.

By any comparison, the 2016 bylaws are significantly weaker in terms of governance requirements than the bylaws they replaced. There are other confusing elements in the 2016 bylaws. One relates to the following:

- Under Duties of Officers (Section 9a.) – the Chairperson shall:
 - a) Be the Chief Executive Officer of the School
 - b) Be the Chairperson of the Board

While this designation is confusing, as written, on exploring what it means, the review team was told that the CEO moniker belongs to the Chairperson of the Executive Committee of the Board. In good governance practice, particularly for non-profit organizations, it is not considered appropriate for the Chairperson of the Board to also serve as the CEO. This dual role presents several significant concerns:

- Lack of independent oversight
- Erosion of accountability
- Governance imbalance
- Stakeholder confidence

Imagine Canada Standards Program [11] discourages dual roles in governance within non-profit organizations. Combining the roles of Chair and CEO in a non-profit is poor governance practice. And, as

[11] [Standards | Imagine Canada](#)

outlined, it undermines accountability, can create conflicts of interest, and reduces stakeholder confidence as detailed above. Best practice is to clearly separate board leadership from executive management.

While it would be speculative to comment on why the 2016 bylaws diminish governance excellence, the analysis indicates the removal of several key areas in the 2016 bylaws serve to lessen the burden on the Executive Board and school management, the impact of which can only be seen as weakening overall governance at the school.

2.2 Board Structure

The structure of the NSFS Board itself is challenging and anachronistic.

Bylaw 8 (2016) outlines the structure of the NSFS Board of Directors. It indicates that “the business of the School shall be conducted by a Board of Directors consisting of 29 members. One from each county (18), nine (9) directors-at-large, the president of FSANS, and the Fire Marshal of Nova Scotia.

The rationale for a board structured in this manner may have made sense when the NSFS was first established. Originally, the idea behind the General Board element of the overall Board of Directors was to ensure that no one service provider could take over a school facility and that fire service providers were both represented and able to be tapped for their wisdom and advice on training requirements.

In practice, the General Board has not functioned in this way:

- There are presently ~fourteen (14) vacancies, many of which have remained unfilled for several years.
- By the NSFS’s own reporting there have only been nine (9) Board meetings since 2016 and eight (8) of those have been annual general meetings. An AGM is the annual business meeting of the organization reporting out to its membership and meeting its obligations under its instrument of incorporation, not a working meeting to conduct the ongoing business of the organization.
- As noted, the NSFS AGM meeting template lists several committees including Training, Planning and Development, Membership, Memorandum of Association and bylaws.

When queried on whether there are Terms of Reference (TOR) for these committees and how frequently they meet, the Executive Director indicated that there are no TOR for the committees and that, historically, they neither have met nor are presently meeting.

At scale, in 2025, with more than ~300 fire service nodes throughout the province, this Board structure simply is not useful for the training facility. Among stakeholders, as reported in the results of the overall engagement and the surveys undertaken, the Board does not have credibility with the majority of those interviewed and among survey respondents.

Two key observations arise from consideration of the persistent high level of vacancy on the General Board – 1. The regions of the province from which these members had been derived may no longer see the value in participating on the General Board and 2. The NSFS has not been proactive on seeking replacement members. There appears to be no strategy or active policies in place to support recruitment and retention of Board members. Rather than develop an active recruitment and retention strategy, it appears the response was to reduce the minimum requirements for quorum.

While having 29 seats may offer the appearance of broad stakeholder representation, the apparent lack of urgency in filling vacancies belies the early tenets of the establishment of such a large Board. Beyond the dysfunctional nature of the Board structure, the number of ‘directors’ at twenty-nine- makes the Board unwieldy and difficult to manage.

When questioned about the current state of the Board, both the Executive Committee and the Executive Director readily noted that it is unworkable and dysfunctional. When asked why it hadn’t been addressed over several decades, the Executive Director noted that several attempts had been made over the years but were unable to be consummated. There was one document that was shared with the review team circa ~ 2009 that recommended a changed structure which was never implemented. There were no ‘minutes’ detailing its consideration and why it may have been discounted. In fact, there is no evidence that it was considered by the Board of Directors at the time. Historically, going back two decades, there was no evidence of vigorous advocacy at any level to drive the required changes that have been so clearly identified by the current Executive Committee of the Board.

As noted in the adjoining text box, the current Executive Director of the NSFS has extensive board experience, including at the international level. It is reasonable to assume that to achieve those roles and effectively discharge the associated duties effectively would require a strong understanding of board governance.

Similarly, the current chairperson of the Executive Committee has professional work experience in senior management (Fire Chief for a municipality) and has had a long-standing presence on the NSFS Board, including in an executive position (Secretary) to a previous Executive Committee of the NSFS Board.

Other current members of the Executive Committee have had experience on the NSFS General Board, as well as on other boards at various levels as noted during the bilateral interviews.

Notwithstanding, this knowledge and experience concentrated at the top of the NSFS, this dysfunctional board structure has continued for decades without ever being addressed and fixed. The 14 vacancies at the General Board level have remained unfilled for several years with no apparent outreach or effort to replace members. **There is no evidence of a concerted effort at renewal until the VFMA was announced.** And the fact that directors on the General Board are leaving is a finding in itself. The Fire Marshal resigned from the Board in August 2024, to which he received no follow up from the Chair, Board Executive or Executive Director. Nor was he encouraged to remain on the Board. The Executive Board Finance position has been vacant for several years.

To assign the most favourable attribution of these challenges to current and recent past Executive Board members and senior staff leadership, the kindest interpretation would be categorized as benign neglect, in bringing critically needed change to the governance of this important community asset.

Executive Director – Senior Level Board Experience

- Chair, Council of Governors – the International Fire Service Accreditation Congress (IFSAC)
- Chair of the Certificate Assembly Board of Governors (CABOG) within IFSAC
- Chair of the Nova Scotia Fire Service Professional Qualifications Board
- Past President of the North American Fire Training Directors (NAFTD)



“...there was supposed to be a Board of Directors with reps from the counties, as you know. With the amount of vacant positions, why did the School not reach out to the counties for representation?”

-Stakeholder Engaged for VFMA

2.3 Policy and Policy Gaps

The founding bylaws of the NSFS put a fine point on safety and safety practices in firefighting generally and at the Firefighter School in particular. Reflecting on the tragic loss of life as a result of the 2019 incident and the subsequent significant NSFS deficiencies identified during follow up investigations, there is a clear record of serious policy gaps and challenges in the safety culture of the NSFS.

The policy gaps don't end there but rather, in the findings of the VFMA, permeate the whole organization as is often the case when questionable governance practices prevail. They include:

Board structure needs to be re-engineered

If the NSFS is continued in a form analogous to its current incorporation, the Board structure needs to be addressed. A smaller Board of, perhaps, 10-12, broadly representative of firefighter organizations and regional representation across Nova Scotia, with a training advisory committee and a safety committee. A renewed board structure would operate under strict term limits for members, staggered to facilitate constant Board renewal. A Board that meets regularly, that promulgates good governance practices, and that offers strong communication would be welcomed and supported by stakeholders.

Key elements of the board restructuring process would include consideration of the following:

- **Board composition and structure** – This will include recruitment of independent board members including municipal fire chiefs, volunteer and career firefighters, academic leaders, and safety experts. Skills-based recruitment is important and requires authentic active stakeholder engagement by leadership to achieve. This also includes ensuring that the Board includes diverse skill sets - members with expertise in governance, finance, HR, training, and OHS. It is important that the Board members are seen as leaders in their field, rather than membership and attendance based on availability as it is currently constructed. Staggered term limits and succession planning paves the way for refreshing and renewing the Board. In this case, balanced geographic representation would also be an important factor.
- **Clear role separation** – Role clarity is important for ensuring the clear separation of board and staff roles and ensuring that General Board directors understand that the Board sets strategy and policy, while management executes programs and operations. Establishing active board sub-committees allows for a range of expertise and discussion to support key decisions and helps to maintain separation of governance and operational leadership.
- **Lack of a comprehensive onboarding policy for Board members** - Considering the structure and size of this Board of Directors and, particularly for General Board members, having a detailed orientation and onboarding policy that explains their role and vests in them the power as a director of an important organization is a foundational requirement. The survey of Board members reported a strong negative critique of their experience in joining the Board and the lack of a proper onboarding process.

The findings of the VFMA suggests that this cohort doesn't always understand their role, that they haven't been officially oriented to it and that the appointment process is often, as one stakeholder categorized it, based on 'whoever is available'. Labelling the list of Board Directors on the NSFS website as 'County Representatives' without a clear definition of the role and responsibility of the Board member is not helpful from the perspective of public and stakeholder accountability.

For an Executive Committee, whose operation is described by some stakeholders as 'by executive fiat', having the General Board members insufficiently empowered and unprepared to assert their legitimate views and influence as directors cedes absolute authority to the Executive Committee and the Executive Director, a factor that some stakeholders assert is by design. There are elements of Board onboarding procedures going back fifteen years that were provided to the Review Team. By contemporary standards, this document is woefully incomplete and couldn't be considered as a comprehensive Board onboarding policy. Director role specifications are not part of this document; their use is not referenced in procedure and the documents that were uploaded in meeting these Board position role specifications appear to have been completed very recently. The conflict-of-interest provisions in this particular document should be revisited and updated to reflect current leading practices.

Bylaws require updating

Beyond the challenges and flaws in the bylaws examined above, NSFS Bylaws need to be updated to include key elements currently missing such as:

- Establishment of a Finance and Audit Committee
- Procurement policy – the Executive Director told the review team that there is no written procurement policy and that the organization did, though, always request three bids for any procurements. Strangely, one of the last documents to be uploaded to the shared drive included a procurement policy. Clarification is required.
- Establishment of a Whistle Blower Policy, considered to be particularly critical in response to what happened with the fatality.
- As noted, the 1993 bylaws put more emphasis on 'safety' than the 2016 bylaws (that were never registered with the Registry of Joint Stocks). This earlier focus on safety as expressed in the 1993 Bylaws needs to also be reflected and, in fact, strengthened, in any bylaw redraft, considering the nature of the work of training firefighters.
- A bylaw update and redraft would also need to identify and address the committees needed to support, add value and facilitate excellence in firefighter training in any NSFS reboot or in standing up an analogous organization. A Training Advisory Committee would be foundational and should be drawn from the best fire safety and training leaders in the province and beyond. Other committees, including a Finance and Audit Committee, need to be added to support greater accountability. Considering the nature of firefighter training, inclusion of a Safety and Risk Committee of the board. This could be designed to require external audits of high-risk activities and training props (live fire, hazardous materials) while also ensuring that OHS standards and policies are monitored and reported at each board meeting. A Nomination and Recruitment Committee could help to ensure the necessary range of skills is ever present on the General Board with succession planning and active recruitment as an ongoing activity to ensure bench strength on the Board.
- Revised bylaws should address board operations including the requirement for regular meetings, term limits to facilitate ongoing board renewal and the documentation that board members can expect to receive.

Performance Evaluation

Performance management is foundational to a well-performing organization and is not optional. In this context, performance management means conducting annual performance evaluations for the Board itself and the Executive Director. Considering that the full Board of Directors has only met nine (9) times since 2016 and eight (8) of those were AGMs, there is no evidence of annual reviews of Board performance, either as a whole or individually. The Executive Director also indicated that his performance has not been regularly evaluated, if at all. Annual goals linked to Executive Director performance in relation to safety, compliance, and stakeholder satisfaction indicators are neither officially set, monitored nor evaluated. In addition, there was no evidence presented in relation to the Executive Director's performance management of his direct reports. This lack of focus on overall organizational performance is another governance failure at the NSFS. In any successor organization, these factors need to be addressed.



Planning and monitoring

In addition to performance evaluation, the Board and its Directors play a critical role in both planning and monitoring functions. These functions are critical in guiding the long-term direction and growth of the NSFS to ensure its mission is achieved. High functioning boards engage in cyclical strategic planning exercises. They engage stakeholders, examine current state, imagine alternative futures, and work together with staff support to develop, approve and revise a well-communicated strategic plan. This includes setting goals, objectives, and priorities that align with the organization's mission.

This oversight function extends to determining the overall resource allocation of the NSFS to support achievement of the goals through budgeting and financial planning. During these processes and through ongoing discussions, effective boards work to identify risks (financial, operational, reputational) and ensures there are plans in place to mitigate them. Board members are supported by training and knowledge building to ensure they are well-equipped to serve effectively in these responsibility areas.

When the VFMA team asked for strategic plans of the organization only one document was offered from 2009. It was a strategy developed by students of a local university through its Business Development Centre at the request of the NSFS staff to outline steps required to initiate a new program for first responders. The strategy was developed with no primary research in its methodology, i.e. interviews or stakeholder engagement, at the request of the NSFS.

Embedded in a funding request to a Member of the NS Legislative Assembly was a document labelled a 'NSFS Infrastructure & Growth Plan 2019.' It included headings typically associated with a strategic plan, such as Vision, Mission, Long Term Goals (3, 5 and 10 years), and a SWOT Analysis with a brief outline of a few activities over the ensuing five years. It is a thin document with broad financial request with limited data or rationale, and no indication of an actual planning process or stakeholder engagement. It does not meet the test for proper strategic planning.

There is no evidence of the Board ever being engaged in a strategic planning process, resource allocation process, structured risk management discussion or monitoring activities associated with a long-term planning function. No reports or dashboards to assess organizational performance were available. Although Board members repeatedly asked to be given the budget documents ahead of any meeting where it was on the agenda, there were vague commitments by the Executive Director to look into it but no evidence of follow-up or responsiveness.

Planning and monitoring are core functions of any governing board, and indeed, are the rationale for their existence. The absence of these core elements is glaring and undermine the Board's role in ensuring that the NSFS stays accountable, effective, and sustainable over time. This dual role of planning and monitoring performance supports transparency, trust, and long-term impact in the firefighting sector.

Overall, the VFMA finds a broad range of governance deficiencies.



3 Accountability

Assessing accountability in organizations involved in high-risk activities like firefighter training, particularly those incorporated under the Nova Scotia *Societies Act*, needs to be framed in the context of specific expectations and best practice measures that signal strong accountability to stakeholders.

These expectations are heightened due to the inherent risks, public funding, and trust placed in such institutions.

In assessing accountability at the NSFS in the context of the VFMA, the review team examined the following key areas:

Legal and Regulatory Compliance

In this context, the evidence points to the NSFS not handling legal and regulatory compliance well. This is particularly evident in the recent past, with the event of the fatality and the NSFS’s handling of its aftermath having caused irreparable reputational damage from which the School has not fully recovered.

During the VFMA, stakeholders from the fire services community in Nova Scotia reported hearing about the fatality on the news.

There is no evidence that either the NSFS Executive Director or the Board Chairperson precipitated an internal investigative review within the School following the fatality. Under the circumstances, this would have been anticipated and initiated either by the Chair of the Executive Committee or the Executive Director through intercessions with the Board. There were ‘virtual meetings’ (3 reported) between the Executive Committee and the Executive Director in the aftermath of the incident. A plenary Board meeting was not scheduled. Crisis communications resources were not brought in to assist in managing the resulting fallout.

When the NSFS was found guilty of offences by the Courts in relation to the death of Skyler Blackie, the creative sentencing model was applied. Part of the Court sentence included the requirement to deliver a presentation to three audiences on the tragic event. When delivered as this model intends, it has been lauded as having the ability to transform a punitive moment into a potentially transformative one. It brings education, accountability, and healing together in a way that traditional penalties often cannot. It forces an organization to confront and communicate the impact of the event, showing they understand the consequences. It can also inform others about what went wrong and how similar tragedies can be prevented. Preparing and delivering the presentation can lead to deep internal reflection, humanizing the impact, and prompting changes in policies, training, and culture. When done sincerely, it can offer a sense of justice to victims or families by publicly validating the harm caused. It is also an opportunity for an organization to show its willingness to be transparent and not hide from its mistakes. Sincere efforts to educate and acknowledge wrongdoing can also begin to restore credibility over time.

Comments from the Firefighter Survey

“I avoid the NSFS because I completed the evolution that killed Skyler before he did.”

“The facility is falling apart and is an environmental spill nightmare.”

“NSFS is a dangerous place that should not be used. No safety practices, no environmental consideration.”

“Mental health, post-incident debriefing, and resilience training need to be part of the curriculum.”

“The governance of NSFS is opaque, out of touch, and self-serving.”

VFMA Firefighter Survey Responses

In this case, the NSFS chose to hire an external third party to develop the presentation. A third party also delivered it to the three audiences, one of which was the Executive Board itself. The opportunity to deeply acknowledge the wrongdoing and for NSFS leadership to speak about how such a tragedy could have been prevented in a way that authentically, and without excuse, accepted responsibility could have served to build trust and the NSFS's reputation. This opportunity was not taken up by the NSFS leadership.

Taking a professional approach to responding to this tragic incident would have helped in managing and mitigating the reputational damage the School has experienced. In fact, the evidence suggests that the manner in which this was handled internally would be considered a textbook case of how not to do it. Its legacy and the follow along effect, as revealed from multiple sources through this study, has been the precipitation of a crisis of confidence in the NSFS among fire service stakeholders province wide. This includes feedback from stakeholders during the engagement and through comments from the fire service community in the surveys distributed as noted in the text box above.

To meet the test of full compliance with legal and regulatory requirements means:

- **Occupational Health & Safety (OHS) and other regulatory requirements are met** – As chronicled elsewhere in this report, it's clear that in the aftermath of the fatality, the School struggled to bring the facility fully in line with OHS regulations and requirements in a timely manner. On the matter of clear documentation of adherence to and prompt rectification of notices and directives relating to non-compliance, the NSFS has struggled to implement, even Court-imposed requirements related to the fatality in a timely manner.
- **Society incorporation obligations** (e.g., filings, bylaw adherence) – The NSFS has, until very recently, not been compliant with filing requirements under the *Societies Act*. For a period of thirteen (13) years the NSFS was non-compliant with reporting requirements under the Act.

- **Requirements under the Act respecting Private Career Colleges** – The NSFS has gaps its regulatory obligations as a private career college. At the time of this writing, the NSFS still has not satisfied an order of the PCC Director to address two outstanding requirements relating to the safe operation of its pre-employment program issued in August of 2024, more than ten months ago.
- **Transparent Governance Structures** – The test for this measure of accountability, includes many factors. Prominent among them is the importance of the separation of roles (e.g., Chair and CEO). Under the NSFS 2016 bylaws the Chair and the CEO positions are integrated – a clear governance failure. Another factor is transparency in respect to overall operations. In this context well-functioning non-profit organizations are expected to have the following:
 - A **strategic plan** that sets out the organization's vision, mission (purpose) values and commitments and outlines operational priorities.
 - An **annual, usually integrated, business and budget plan** that establishes annual operational objectives. The last document considered to be a strategic plan by the Executive Director was produced in 2009. This document was derived from a consultant's report designed to advance a new program idea, narrow in scope and not the usual process a board would follow. There are no annual business plans created at the NSFS.
 - A published **annual report** that documents what has happened in the organization during the year. The NSFS does not produce an annual report.
 - **Published bylaws, policies, information** on Board composition, and terms of reference for Board committees. This refers to committees that are considered foundational to good governance, including having a Finance and Audit Committee.

- **As noted in the adjoining text box, the School’s Executive Director wrote to the parents of the young firefighter who died at the NSFS refusing them basic information – an unconscionable response by any measure.**
- **Regular and documented Board meetings** for which there are minutes and recorded Board motions and resolutions. As noted in the governance section above, in the previous nine years there has only been one plenary Board ongoing business meeting.
- A frequently recurring comment from stakeholders during the VFMA was the **poor communications** from the NSFS. These comments related not only to bigger picture issues but to routine matters including communications relating to courses and scheduling. Stakeholders also point out that there was no outreach to the full Board at the time of the fatality.
- **Evidence of a Strong Safety Culture** – While there are those who support the NSFS among stakeholders, a majority of respondents question the School’s safety culture and its management. Though NSFS officials were questioned on the safety policy structure at the NSFS pre-fatality, there is very little in the way of submissions uploaded from the School in this regard. The record post-fatality is clearer with information on the internal JOSH Committee and response, though belated, to the OHS review. Having an active and independent internal safety committee would have gone a considerable distance in demonstrating evidence of a focus on safety.

Under the circumstances, in the aftermath of the fatality at the NSFS, regular third-party audits of equipment, facilities, and procedures would be expected to be part of the infrastructure surrounding a renewal of the organization’s safety culture. Communication to stakeholders in respect to what the NSFS was doing to address past failures would have helped rebuild confidence. It is notable that this gap is also part of the concerns raised by the PCC Director in the program suspension of August 2024, five and a half years after the fatality.

Transparency

In response to a request from the Blackie family for financial statements and the School’s bylaws, NSFS leadership wrote:

“...Regarding your request for access to the bylaws, financial statements and annual reports of the NSFS, I regret to inform you that we are currently unable to fulfill this request.Should circumstances change, or if the requested documents become available, we will notify you promptly”.

Email from NSFS leadership to Mr. and Mrs. Blackie, October 22, 2024

Incident reporting systems with transparent root cause analysis and follow-up is another aspect. NSFS has updated its format for incident reporting, though incident reports of actual events were not made available.



As noted in the adjoining text box, an interesting observation is that the 2016 NSFS bylaws that the NSFS has been using since 2016, make no explicit reference to safety, whereas the 1993 bylaws were explicit in calling out the importance of safety in NSFS operations throughout the document. As noted in the Governance and Oversight section, the 1993 bylaws are superior to the 2016 version.

- **Training Competency and Certification Oversight** – The NSFS shows well in this regard. There are documented training standards aligned with recognized national benchmarks (e.g., NFPA Standards, IFSAC, ProBoard) and systematic certification of firefighters undergoing testing through the NSFSPQB. Not everyone agrees that the current certification process continues to serve the province well and there is an expressed desire among stakeholders to explore other options. The review team has researched this issue.
- **Risk Management and Continuous Improvement** – Managing and mitigating risk and a commitment to continuous improvement demonstratively amplifies accountability. Particularly, following the fatality, and the reality that firefighter training involves high-risk activities needing clear mitigation plans, a formal NSFS Risk Register would be expected. No risk register is in evidence. Instructors and the Executive Director assert that safety is an overriding preoccupation and that incident data is used to improve practice. Stakeholders though are not convinced as safety concerns loomed large throughout survey responses as well as feedback during targeted interviews and focus sessions. To rebuild trust would require a more deliberate and precise effort including communication of the results.
- **Ethical Conduct and Whistleblower Protections** – The NSFS does not have a Whistle Blower Policy. This is a notable deficiency in the post-fatality environment. Some stakeholders also point to the disincentive to report safety-related incidents among part-time instructors because of the nature of their reliance on ongoing work and the fear of retaliation by being dropped for future work.

While difficult to verify, when raised in meetings with the NSFS Board and staff, the likelihood of this being a factor was summarily discounted. That said, the absence of a Whistle Blower Policy with non-retaliation clauses and an adherence to its rigour would likely serve to militate any concerns that may exist around reporting by part-time instructors.

Notwithstanding that the 2016 Bylaws were never officially filed, in the NSFS Bylaws (2016) document, the term “safety” or the concept of safety does not appear explicitly even once in the text.

However, the concept of safety is somewhat implied in the broader context — especially in the objectives of the school:

"The primary object is to train and educate the Fire Service of Nova Scotia..." and "...to benefit all members of the community by providing the highest calibre of training and education to the members of emergency response agencies."

Still, there are no direct references to safety policies, safety oversight, or the safety of students or instructors within the bylaws.

By contrast, the 1993 bylaws, under heading of ‘Committees’ has numerous references to ‘safety’ and prescriptively designates a ‘Safety Committee’ (Section 11-f) and provides terms of reference. It makes further reference to the importance of ‘safety’ in relation to the ‘Training Committee’ (Section 12.2.2) also described therein.

VFMA Team Research and Analysis

- **Measures That Constitute Strong Accountability under the Nova Scotia Societies Act** - Organizations incorporated under the Nova Scotia *Societies Act* are legally required to:
 - Maintain accurate records of membership, financials, and minutes;
 - File annual returns; and
 - Operate within their stated objects and bylaws.

However, to be demonstrably accountable, especially in high-risk contexts such as the NSFS, they should go beyond minimum compliance and practice a high level of governance transparency including publicly disclosing Board membership. Posting Board member biographies, transparency relating to Board deliberations and decisions, bylaws and amendments and strategic and annual business plans are the basics. As documented above, the NSFS does not meet this test. In fact, its reporting to the Registry of Joint Stock Companies was years out of date until recently updated.

- **Stakeholder Communication and Engagement** – According to stakeholders, this is an area in which the NSFS Board and staff leadership falls down. The absence of regular reporting, slowness of issuing certificates, and training schedule disruptions are among the areas identified as problematic in the School’s accountability to them. The fact that stakeholders heard about the fatality through public media was shocking to many. The absence of formal stakeholder advisory committees or feedback mechanisms is also a concern and a matter that was frequently raised.
- **Performance and Financial Reporting** – On most measures related to this area, the NSFS would receive a failing grade. Performance reporting against mission and strategic goals is non-existent; there is no strategic plan or annual business plan. Audited financial statements are published annually at the AGM. Notably though, governance practices in relation to the appointment of auditors are not transparent – the NSFS has had the same audit firm for ~ 20 years. It is not the competence of the firm that is in question; rather, the process or lack thereof respecting the appointment and the nature of the resulting engagement.

In an interview, the review team was told that the NSPS also does not have a written procurement policy despite the fact that it does procure professional services from time to time. The Executive Director indicated that they use the methodology of requesting three bids. Later in the process of uploading documents to the shred drive, a procurement policy appeared.

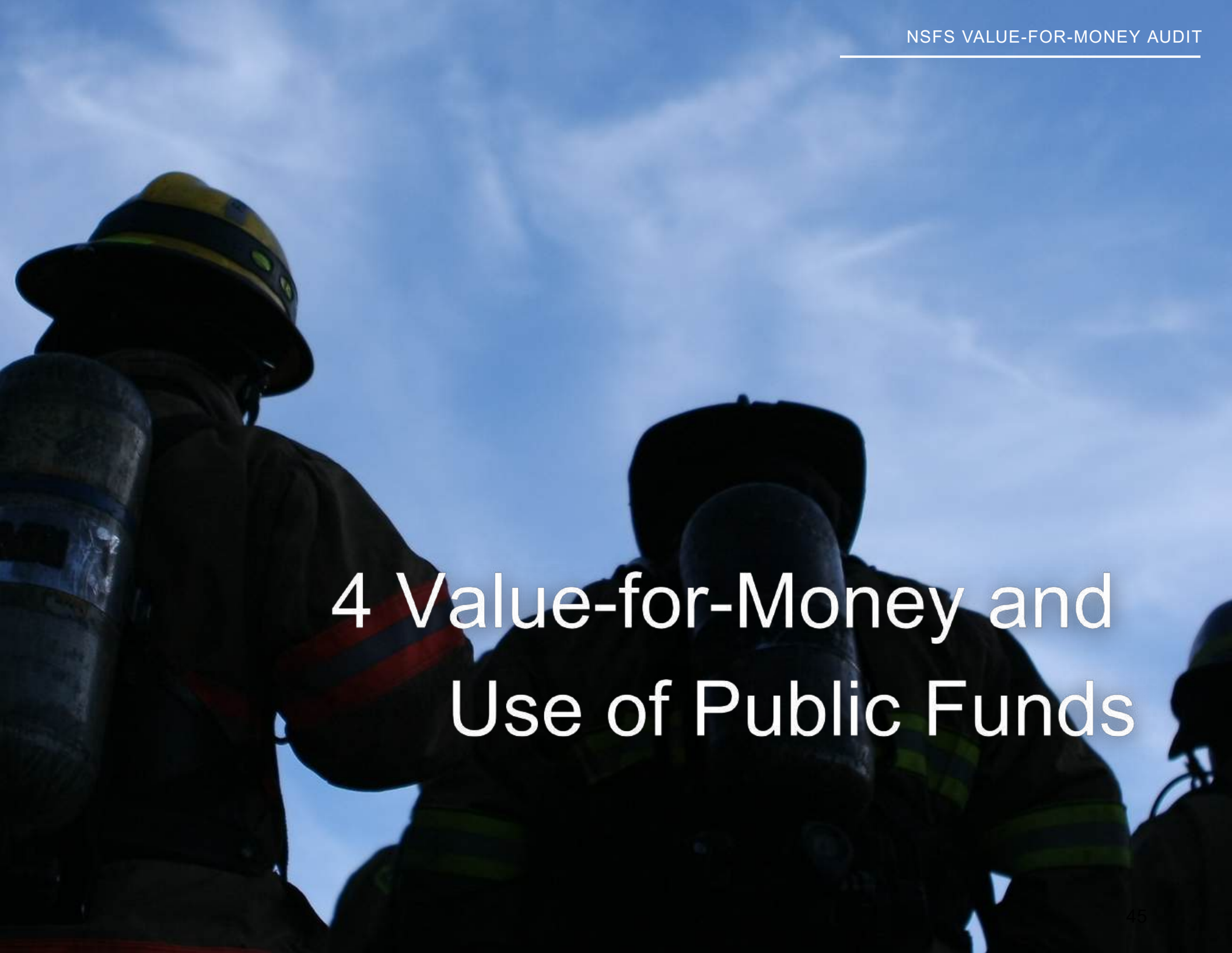
Based on the Executive Director’s brief on this matter, it is not clear to the review team whether this policy is in use or whether it has, perhaps, only recently been developed notwithstanding its being dated 2018. Lack of clarity in respect to however, the absence of a procurement policy negatively impacts transparency and the overall confidence in the professionalism of the organization. Particularly in the period following the fatality, the development of training and safety metrics (e.g., injuries, near misses, pass rates) would have been expected. There is no evidence of a comprehensive thrust toward developing and implementing these.

- **Board Accountability and Oversight** – Accountability tests for this measure include regular board self-assessments and evaluation of the Executive Director, conflict of interest disclosures and recusals, and committees for finance and audit, safety, training and governance. On all three the review found no evidence of these being in place or ever considered. The finance position on the Executive Committee has been vacant for several years. In fact, as explored in the Governance and Oversight Section, oversight and governance is managed by the Executive Committee and the Executive Director with no real accountability to the Board of Directors.

The fixes to address the foregoing gaps and deficiencies in accountability are clear and intuitive. To demonstrate strong accountability, particularly in a high-risk training environment like firefighter training, an organization must:

- **Maintain rigorous safety oversight,**
- **Operate with transparent governance,**
- **Be responsive to stakeholders, and**
- **Go beyond the legal minimums of the *Societies Act* to build public trust.**

For the NSFS, the hill to climb is steeper in generating goodwill and confidence among stakeholders considering past practices and the governance failures and deficiencies identified in the VFMA. It is not clear to the reviewers that, even with addressing these many shortcomings, the NSFS could rebuild the trust that has been lost with its stakeholders and clients.



4 Value-for-Money and Use of Public Funds

4.1 Introduction

Important elements of the VFMA included examining the operations of the NSFS over time in relation to financial management and oversight.

This specific analysis was focused on two key areas:

1. Value for Money by assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of NSFS's resource management in achieving safety and operational goals.
2. Use of Public Funds by assessing the financial management and accountability of public funds allocated to the NSFS.

4.2 Financial Data and Information

As part of this review, a comprehensive data and information request was submitted to the NSFS to support the VFMA. The request covered a wide range of operational, financial, and performance-related data, including training delivery metrics, course participation and outcomes, instructor capacity, financial records, staffing compensation, and procurement practices (see adjacent text box).

This information was significantly delayed with many aspects of it arriving near the end of the actual audit process and during report writing.

While the NSFS Executive Director uploaded background information to the shared drive (in three sessions over the course of 2 weeks), as in other information requests, at the time of writing, a number of information gaps remain.

The request covered the following high-level categories:

1. Training Delivery: Scope, Quality, and Outcomes

- Annual course and enrollment metrics (by course type, format, location)
- Student demographics and tuition type
- Pass/fail rates, course evaluations, and NFPA alignment
- Outcomes such as employment in fire services

2. Equity and Geographic Reach

- Rural/urban enrollment distribution
- Demographic data (e.g., gender, age)
- Barriers to participation (cost, waitlists, accessibility)

3. Capacity and Infrastructure

- Training facilities and equipment inventory
- Instructor capacity and turnover
- Facility condition and deferred maintenance needs

4. Financials and Costs

- Cost per course (NSFS and participant)
- Insurance Levy support, tuition revenue, and funding sources
- Trends in annual budgets and expenditures
- Cost per trained firefighter (if calculable)

5. Staffing and Compensation

- Salaries and compensation by role
- Employment types, funding sources, and HR costs
- Travel, benefits, per diems, and recruitment costs

6. Volunteer and Unfunded Labour

- Volunteer contributions and unreimbursed department costs
- Staff time and costs associated with external committee involvement (e.g., IFSAC/Pro Board)

7. Procurement and Oversight

- Procurement policies, vendor selection, and expenditures
- Primary vendors and goods/services provided
- Internal performance metrics and KPIs, including instructor evaluations and delivery targets

Appendix A provides the data request transmitted to NSFS

These gaps share many of the same features as those experienced in other areas during completion of the VFMA, including deficiencies in:

- Providing a coherent structure for annual integrated business and budget planning, including capital plans.
- Providing evidence of board discussions and approvals related to budget development and ongoing management along with associated documentation.
- Presenting associated planning documents, board motions and resolutions to support annual budget implementation and expenditures.
- The presence of any budget evaluation and monitoring framework and strategy to assess financial performance and resulting metrics and the methodology(ies) used to keep the board periodically informed of budget results during any particular period.
- Detailed information related to student evaluations, program completion rates, student satisfaction rates, or labour market outcomes evaluations in the case of career firefighter training and placement for volunteer firefighters, as part of a NSFS evaluation framework to support continuous improvement efforts.

It is equally important to note that financial management and oversight at the NSFS is negatively impacted by the policy gaps identified in the governance review. There is the earlier references question of procurement policy, the full board of directors is not involved in budget planning and deliberations, there is no accountability to fire services stakeholders through annual reporting of results and there is not regular communication to the overall board on budget or other matters.

Notably and inexplicably, the finance position on the Executive Committee of the Board has been vacant for several years.

As a result, financial management appears to be taking place in a vacuum. Without a Finance and Audit Committee at the Board there is no evidence of independent oversight and the audit firm and auditor the NSFS uses has exercised that role for more than two decades.

While there is a procurement policy, it has not been updated since 2018. Procurement practices and supply chain management is an evolving field, particularly since COVID, and has been continually updated to ensure best value for money through a lens of fairness and transparency. NSFS could benefit from a refresh.

Cumulatively and individually, these gaps and shortcomings make it difficult to assess the overall financial management and probity at the NSFS. Like so much else studied in this review there is an opacity to the financial operations that forego regular board review, scrutiny and transparency. Several key items from the request had been uploaded to the SharePoint late in the process, and core datasets needed to complete a full assessment, particularly in relation to internal performance metrics (arising from our analysis expectations around typical key performance indicators (KPIs), referenced within the NSFS as KIPs or 'key indicators of performance,' are still outstanding.

As a result, both of these areas of examination in the VFMA examine financial management, albeit, along different lines, this chapter proceeds based on the limited financial and operational details available through what background documents were supplied by the NSFS. Findings should therefore be considered provisional and subject to refinement should the full dataset become available.

4.2.1 Methodological Note

The first part of this financial analysis presented in this chapter is based on a composite dataset assembled from multiple files uploaded to the shared drive as part of the Value-for-Money Audit. These data were requested to address the 'Value for Money' and 'Use of Public Funds' components of the VFMA. The data sources included financial details (budget and actuals from 2015 to 2025), annual reports, meeting minutes, audited financial statements, and presentation materials provided by NSFS, among other documents.

To ensure consistency and comparability across years, pivot tables were used to extract revenue and expense 'actuals' for the years shown. Actuals for the 2018 fiscal year were not found among the files provided and are therefore excluded from the trend analysis (budget 2018 was provided but not used). Consistent with the difficulty experienced by the review team in securing usable data and information early in the process, where possible, supplementary data was drawn from narrative sections of annual reports or presentations to fill contextual gaps and verify figures.

The resulting dataset supports longitudinal tracking of key revenue and expense categories from 2015 through the 2025 budget projection.

4.2.2 Financial Performance

Financial performance over the past decade reflects an observable pattern of volatility, with both revenues and expenditures shifting significantly year over year. After initial years of relative stability, total revenue declined steeply between 2020 and 2022, before rebounding in 2023. Despite this partial recovery, revenue remains well below the levels seen from 2015 to 2019, in nominal terms.

Training delivery, particularly off-site training, has historically driven a large share of revenue, but fluctuations in program offerings and participation have contributed to instability. The elimination of facility rental income and a decline in pre-employment and industrial training revenues are further straining the organization's financial resilience.

“Clearly the current economic position of the school and its closure leaves questions about the economic management of the school’s board of directors/executive director and its funding model. On the surface, both appear to need improvement.”

-Stakeholder comment, VFMA Input

On the expense side, wages and salaries remain the largest single cost, with modest increases projected. Despite some cost-saving measures, the organization continued to face losses, with a projected surplus in 2025. **These figures point to a challenging financial model that is increasingly dependent on short-term training revenues, fundraising, and cost containment measures. This volatility may also reflect a pullback from users resulting from the erosion in confidence as expressed by stakeholders who use the facility.**

The current revenue-expenditure imbalance and over-reliance on a narrow set of income streams underscores the need for a strategic re-evaluation of program offerings, pricing, asset utilization, and long-term sustainability.

4.2.3 Revenues Trends and Interpretation (2015–2025)

Based on the information provided for review, several formerly stable or significant revenue sources have deteriorated substantially over the past decade. Industrial training and membership revenue have dropped by over 50%, and miscellaneous or ad hoc training opportunities have nearly disappeared. While fundraising has increased dramatically, growing by over 1,600%, this is not a sustainable replacement for core revenue, and it raises questions about the source(s), purpose, and long-term stability of this funding.



Revenue Category	% Change 2015 to 2025 (Budget)	Interpretation & Questions → Notes / Interpretation
Fundraising Revenue	+1,688.9%	This has emerged as a major funding source. Its importance raises questions about donor identity, sustainability, and whether it is filling gaps left by public funding shortfalls or declining earned revenues.
Industrial Training Revenue	-84.6%	Severe decline; possibly due to market competition, pricing, or lost contracts. This was once a major income stream.
Membership Dues	-55.0%	Reflects steep drop in active members, consistent with the reported 2023 drop). This signals implications for governance and program participation.
Other Training Revenue	-77.2%	Broad-based collapse of miscellaneous offerings; may indicate lost market / relevance or diversification failure.
Pre-Employment Training	-26.5%	Still relevant, but much less than in the past. Was once core; now intermittent or underutilized; was suspended by order of PCC officials in August of 2024.
Provincial Grants	0.0%	Held flat for a decade. No inflation indexing.
Off-site Training Revenue	Volatile, strong in 2023	A major revenue driver with large year-to-year swings. Rebounded in 2023, but future stability is uncertain.
On-site Training Revenue	Declined then rebounded	Hit lows in 2020–2021, timed with COVID, with recovery in 2022–2023. Suggests some capacity restoration or demand return.
Marine Training Revenue	Highly variable	Irregular delivery or reliance on outside partners - suggests it's a non-core offering or tied to niche contracts.
Customized Training	Appears only after 2022	A newer revenue category. May offer growth potential but unproven as a stable revenue stream.
Facility Rental Revenue	\$0 in 2023–2024	Indicates a possible loss of external rental clients or facility usability. Missed opportunity for passive income or cost offsetting.
Merchandise Sales	Modest increase	Not a major contributor but showing some incremental growth. Reflects attempts to diversify revenue or increase public profile.
Sales Publications	Fluctuating but solid	One of the more consistent income sources. Not growing significantly but remains part of the base.

Table 1. Revenue Trends and Interpretation, 2015 to 2025

Overall, the NSFS revenue profile has shifted from a model anchored in training delivery and public support toward one increasingly reliant on private fundraising, episodic income streams, and variable programming.

While some categories (e.g., off-site training and fundraising) show short-term gains, others (e.g., industrial training and membership) have eroded significantly.

Objectively, and in a climate where emergency response demand is growing in volume and complexity, in part, due to climate change, the fixed provincial support is notable. Provincial operating support has remained unchanged since at least 2015, eroding in real terms each year.

Despite numerous attempts by the Province to have the NSFS provide the rationale and justification for requests for granting funding increases, supporting documentation was not provided. This fundamental gap between a need for funding increases and NSFS's inability to provide a business case to support their request, has contributed to rising tuition, reduced service levels, and a growing dependence on private donations and short-term income streams.

4.2.4 Expense Trends and Interpretation (2015–2025)

Expense Category	Change / Status	Interpretation & Questions
Total Revenue vs. Expenses	Revenue ↓ ~25% / Expenses ↓ ~19%	NSFS is not cutting fast enough to match revenue losses. But aggressive cuts risk weakening core services: one “cannot shrink to greatness.”
Wages & Salaries	+2.8%	Flat overall despite organizational instability. Lack of staff-level data being made available by NSFS, makes it hard to assess whether costs are rising due to wage inflation or staffing levels. Without detailed staffing data, it is not possible to assess whether payroll changes reflect staffing reductions, wage freezes, or reclassification of roles.
Total Payroll (incl. benefits)	+3.6%	Overall compensation is stable, but composition (e.g., EI -6.4% vs. WCB +74.2%) suggests uneven treatment or structural change.
CPP Expense	+22.3%	Low expenditure level but a significant growth rate; possibly wage inflation or more permanent roles.
WCB Expense	+74.2%	May reflect increased risk premiums after high-profile incidents and ongoing sanctions post fatality , but still low (~\$6K).
Admin Travel & Entertainment	+110.0%	Large increase over the period, but still minimal expense.
Director Travel & Entertainment	-5.4%	Relatively flat; but with multiple separate travel accounts.
Executive Travel & Entertainment	-32.7%	Cutbacks evident, but the total amount may still merit scrutiny.
Publications Expense	+17.8%	Large and consistent (\$100K+ range consistently, peaking at \$163K): Raises question of whether related revenues are merely a flow-through. If this corresponds to printed manuals or curriculum materials, it may be worth investigating whether these are cost-recoverable or subsidized by related revenue streams.
Vehicle Repair & Maintenance	+64.7%	Significant and appears high relative to overall scale of operations: May indicate aging fleet or poor upkeep. Additional clarity is needed on number and type of vehicles maintained.
Insurance	+140% (approx.)	Steady rise to nearly \$100K by 2023, may be linked to increased risk rating or coverage expansion post-fatality.
Training Equipment Maintenance	Highly volatile; spike in 2024	2024 shows a dramatic rise (~\$74K). Possibly deferred maintenance now catching up or a specific one-time capital repair.
Pre-Employment Training Expense	-99.5% (from \$113K to \$582)	Formerly a major cost centre. A sharp drop may reflect a collapsed program and more recently, the shift in delivery model with PCC’s shut down in August 2024.
Depreciation (multiple lines)	Gradual decline	Aging assets, no significant new investment. Potential signal of capital renewal gap.
Utilities & Building Costs	Down ~30%	Despite inflation, costs fell. Suggests either reduced use of space or delayed/incomplete building maintenance.

Table 2. Expense Trends and Interpretation, 2015-2025

Notably, there are three distinct travel-related expense categories (Admin, Director, Executive), which collectively represent an inconsistent approach to tracking or limiting discretionary costs. In 2024 alone, Admin Travel & Entertainment increased by 110%.

4.2.5 Observations

In reviewing the detailed revenue and expenditure lines, a number of noteworthy patterns and questions emerged. These are grouped thematically below and presented without implication of priority, but to inform future analysis and audit follow-up:

Revenue Credibility and Volatility

- Fundraising Revenue has increased dramatically since 2019. It is likely driven by 50/50 gaming or similar chance-based fundraising, which introduces volatility and reputational risk. Clarity is needed on the source and sustainability of this funding.
- Miscellaneous Revenue surged in 2020 and 2021, with no corresponding rise in grant income. These large one-time amounts may represent COVID-related emergency funding, but they are not labelled as such. The source and restrictions (if any) should be confirmed.
- Charitable Donations were surprisingly low across the entire 10-year period. If the organization was viewed as mission-driven and essential, especially pre-2019, higher donation activity might have been expected.
- Membership Dues show large swings year to year, inconsistent with the overall (gradually declining) membership trend. This could reflect inconsistently applied fee structures, collection practices, or changes in eligibility or dues timing.

Program Delivery and Cost Recovery

- Marine Training Revenue, while sometimes emphasized in reporting, was not a consistent or major income stream, and appears highly dependent on external demand.
- On-site Training Revenue was more volatile than anticipated, even adjusting for COVID disruptions, raising questions about course scheduling, capacity constraints, or fluctuating demand.

- Off-site Training Revenue remained relatively strong, despite growth in county-based training models. This suggests that NSFS retained a role in regional delivery or still filled key training gaps.
- Pre-Employment Training revenue dropped to zero in 2022, indicating the program was not delivered that year. The projected rebound in 2025 appears ambitious without evidence of a recruitment or delivery plan.

“Our belief is that the Nova Scotia Firefighters School as an institution is extremely valuable tool in delivering training for fire services in the province, especially as the only institute able to offer professional certification in the province. That said, with recent price increases, it is inevitable that volunteer agencies are getting less training for their money than they were previously. We could only speculate as to why this price increase has occurred, but surely the audit will help bring these facts to light.”

-Stakeholder comment, VFMA Input

Expenditures and Value-for-Money

- Publications Expense remains consistently high. If tied to curriculum materials or accreditation standards, this may be appropriate, but if it includes advertising in partner publications or event programs (e.g., IFSAC / Pro Board), the rationale should be made explicit.
- Vehicle Repair and Maintenance costs have increased significantly over time. Without having been provided the details and knowing the number or usage profile of vehicles, it is difficult to assess whether this spending is justified.
- Training Equipment Maintenance shows a sharp spike in 2024, possibly reflecting deferred maintenance catching up or investment in legacy systems. This may indicate a broader issue of aging infrastructure with uncertain capital renewal planning.

- Merchandise Sales remained marginal (<\$50K total over 10 years), raising questions about the staff or volunteer effort invested in low-return activity.
- Admin, Executive, and Director Travel are tracked separately, with modest expenditures across all three. While Admin Travel shows a 110% increase from 2015 to 2025, this reflects an increase of less than \$1,100 over a decade and is not material in the broader financial context. The low overall spend and fluctuating usage across categories could still benefit from clarification in travel policy and reporting standards and whether travel expenses are tracked elsewhere.

Capital and Infrastructure

- A significant training equipment purchase appears to have been made in 2018, with ongoing amortization near \$40K annually. Clarification is needed on what was purchased and how it is currently being used.
- Utilities costs have remained flat or declined, which may reflect lower facility usage, improved efficiency, or delayed/incomplete maintenance. This trend contrasts with inflationary pressures on most other line items.



Compensation Trends and Staffing Observations (2016–2025)

A review of staffing data from 2016 to 2025 reveals important patterns that inform broader organizational performance, accountability, and value-for-money considerations.



Pace of Growth in Executive Compensation

The Executive Director’s salary increased by over 60% in the past decade, from \$95,517 in 2016 to \$153,907 in 2025. This growth far exceeds that of most other positions, particularly instructional and maintenance roles. While some compensation growth is expected, the pace and scale of executive increases warrant review, particularly in the absence of clearly articulated performance benchmarks or organizational growth indicators. This raises questions about internal equity and the alignment of leadership compensation with outcomes and responsibilities and how these are established by the board.

Achieving 4% increases in salary year over year for a ten-year period, despite significant organizational underperformance and mission-critical deficiencies, particularly in the last six 6 years is astounding. **This pattern of unmerited compensation reflects a troubling lack of accountability at the Executive Board level.**



Role Continuity and Position Tracking

Several roles appear and disappear across the dataset:

- Program Manager and Business Development roles vanish after 2017 and 2020, respectively.
- Instructor and registrar roles show patchy or incomplete data.
- For those paid hourly, there is little visibility into staffing levels (FTEs) per role.



Slow and Uneven Wage Growth for Frontline Roles

Wage-based positions such as Sr. Instructors, Instructors, Maintenance, and Administrative Assistants experienced only modest wage growth (generally 20%–35% over the decade). For example:

- Sr. Instructor (4) rose from \$24.37/hour (2016) to \$32.95/hour (2025).
- Instructor (1) rose from \$24.54/hour (2017) to \$26.79/hour (2025). Given that these roles are central to the school’s core mission, stagnant compensation may impact morale, retention, and the ability to attract qualified candidates.

This raises questions of pay equity, especially relative to leadership compensation growth.

Position	2016 Pay	2025 Pay	% increase over the period
Executive Director	\$95,517	\$153,907	+61%
Executive Assistant	\$42,839	\$63,513	+48%
Sr. Instructor (4)	\$24.37/hr	\$32.95/hr	+35%
Instructor (1)	\$24.54/hr (2017)	\$26.79/hr	+9%
Maintenance (1)	\$18.59/hr	\$24.28/hr	+31%
Registrar (2)	\$37,057	\$42,634 (2021)	+15%

Table 3. NSFS Positions and Rates of Pay, 2016-2025



Lack of Transparency Between Wage-Based and Salaried Roles

The use of both hourly and salaried rates without consistent documentation or conversion makes it difficult to compare roles or assess total personnel costs. For example, and as noted, it is unclear whether instructors work full-time or part-time hours, or how variable pay (e.g., overtime, seasonal contracts) is managed. This lack of transparency hinders strategic decision-making and weakens the Board’s ability to forecast or control salary-related costs.

In combination, the compensation trends suggest:

- No clear compensation framework or performance-based salary structure.
- Limited internal oversight or benchmarking to sector standards.
- A tendency toward centralized control of financial and HR decisions, with minimal board engagement or documented rationale for adjustments.

These trends echo broader governance concerns raised elsewhere in the review, particularly around role clarity, executive dominance, and board accountability.

Financial History (2018 to 2024)

Uploaded to the share site late in the process, the 2018 to 2024 financial history also reveals a pattern of declining revenues, rising fixed costs, and growing fiscal risk, affirming the conclusions based on a review financial information for individual years to 2015.

Over the 2018 to 2024 period, total revenues have decreased by 31.6%, while expenses have only declined 21.8%, creating a trajectory that is unsustainable.

Payroll now consumes over 50% of total expenses, growing steadily despite revenue contractions.

While some efforts to diversify revenue (i.e., the recent introduction of customized training and improved fundraising) show promise, they are not yet sufficient to offset the losses in core revenue streams such as pre-employment training (which NSFS cannot currently offer) and facility rentals.

Meanwhile, the sharp increase in training equipment maintenance and a drop in capital reinvestment suggest that aging infrastructure is becoming a cost driver, a trend exacerbated by declining depreciation figures.

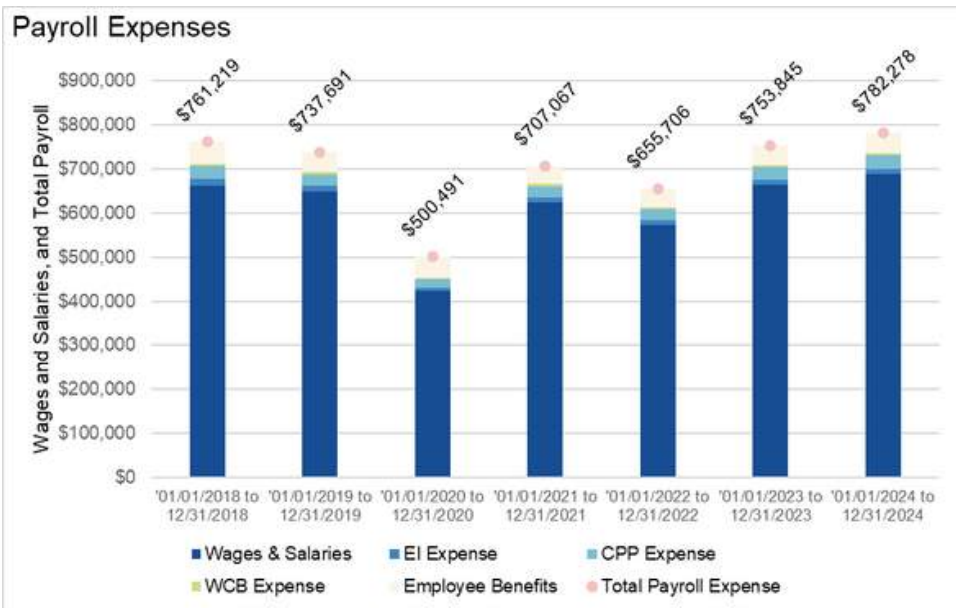


Figure 2. NSFS Payroll Expenses, 2018-2024

The result is a net loss of \$174,662 in 2024, the largest in the 7-year period, and a marked deterioration from earlier periods of modest surplus.

Without a coordinated response that includes cost containment, revenue diversification, and strategic investment planning, the school's financial sustainability will continue to erode.

NSFS is at a fiscal crossroads: the underlying issues identified in earlier assessments have not only persisted, rather, they have intensified.

Immediate attention is required to realign spending with realistic revenue expectations, modernize the delivery model, and re-establish financial resilience all in the context of a laser focus on its critical mission that concentrates on firefighter training, not extraneous revenue generating opportunities.

4.2.6 Summary Insight

While total expenses have declined over the review period, the scale of cuts has not matched the sharper decline in revenue. Discretionary spending (e.g., travel, publications) appears fragmented and inconsistently managed. Payroll remains the largest cost driver, though stable overall.

Maintenance, insurance, and WCB costs are trending upward, likely driven by risk exposure and aging infrastructure. Program delivery costs, particularly for training, have fallen sharply, reinforcing concerns about NSFS's ability to deliver on its core mandate if funding remains flat.

These patterns suggest a need to clarify cost structures, modernize procurement and delivery systems, and assess which functions are core to NSFS's future mandate.

It may be appropriate for the Province to consider increasing the legislated threshold of the insurance levy that supports firefighter training from \$0.50 to a level more reflective of current costs and firefighting conditions (e.g., hotter fires burning longer, EV batteries).

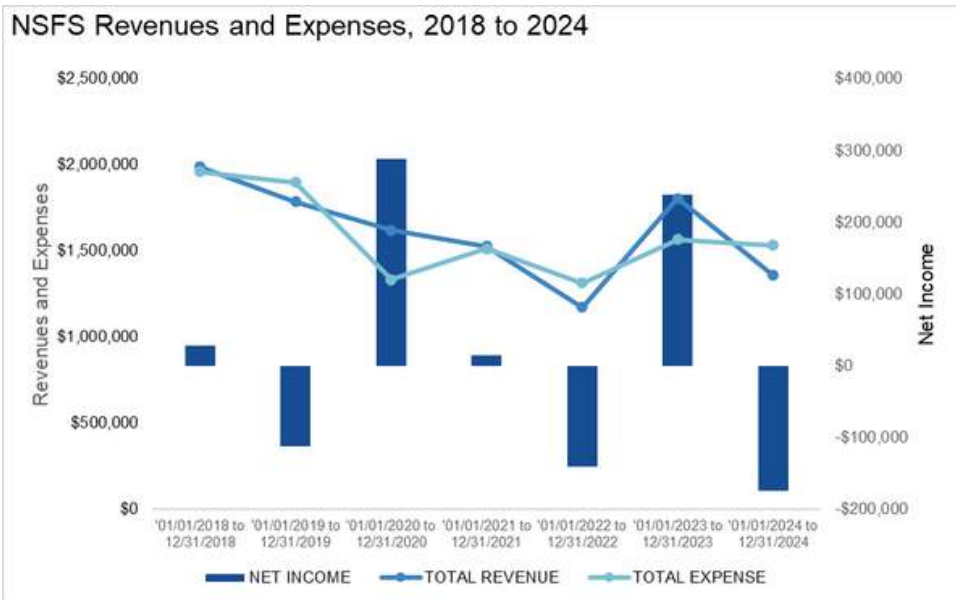


Figure 3. NSFS Revenue and Expenses, 2018-2024

4.3 KPIs

4.3.1 Membership Trends and Organizational Vitality

The data reveals considerable fluctuations in membership over the past decade, with generally stable or rising numbers between 2012 and 2022, including a peak of 194 members in 2021. However, 2023 marks a precipitous decline to just 21 members, an 89% drop from the previous year and the lowest recorded in over a decade.

This sharp drop may signal serious structural, reputational, or operational issues affecting the organization. While a similar dip occurred in 2017, recovery was swift. Whether such a rebound is possible again remains uncertain and should be a focus of further inquiry.

This trend strongly reinforces the need to assess institutional health and the sustainability of the organization’s training, governance, and funding model.

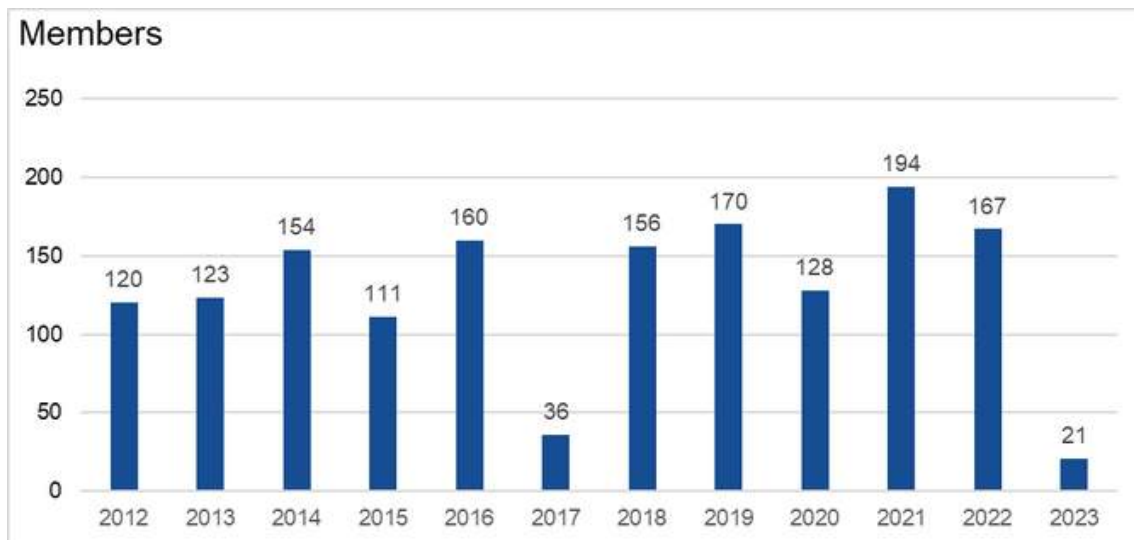


Figure 4. NSFS Membership, 2012-2023



4.3.2 Enrollment

An analysis of training volumes and certification output at NSFS reveals important shifts in programming, participation, and instructional outcomes over the past two decades.

Between 2005 and 2017, the school experienced high and growing student enrollment, with annual participation exceeding 5,000 in peak years like 2015 and 2016. Course volumes also expanded during this period, resulting in relatively low student-per-course ratios, a likely reflection of smaller, decentralized, or specialized training offerings. Certification rates during this time, however, remained modest.

From 2012 to 2016, only 7 to 9% of students were recorded as achieving formal certifications. This suggests that while NSFS was delivering high volumes of training, a significant share of it may not have been oriented toward certification outcomes.

Beginning in 2018 and accelerating through the COVID period (2020–2022), the institution’s training profile began to shift. Both student and course volumes declined sharply, likely reflecting a combination of public health restrictions, organizational disruption arising from the aftermath of the fatality and related investigations, as well as shifting demand. However, even as participation dropped, the percentage of students earning certifications rose significantly, reaching 27% in 2021 and remaining above 15% in 2023. This shift suggests a possible narrowing of focus toward fewer, more targeted courses with clearer pathways to certification. It may also reflect improved alignment with national standards or better certification tracking.

In 2023, the system shows signs of recovery: student volumes climbed to 4,531 (the highest since 2017), and course offerings increased to 340. Yet, the student-to-course ratio rose back to 13.33, similar to levels seen in the mid-2000s. This could signal larger classes, reduced instructional capacity, or greater use of centralized or virtual delivery models. Certification efficiency in 2023 remained strong at 15%, suggesting that the school is still emphasizing outcomes, even as enrollment expands.

Together, these patterns suggest a system in transition: moving from broad-based, high-volume participation toward a more certification-oriented model, one that may now be facing pressure to scale back up without compromising outcome quality. Whether this balance can be sustained under current funding and staffing conditions remains an open question.

This is noted in Figure 5, below:

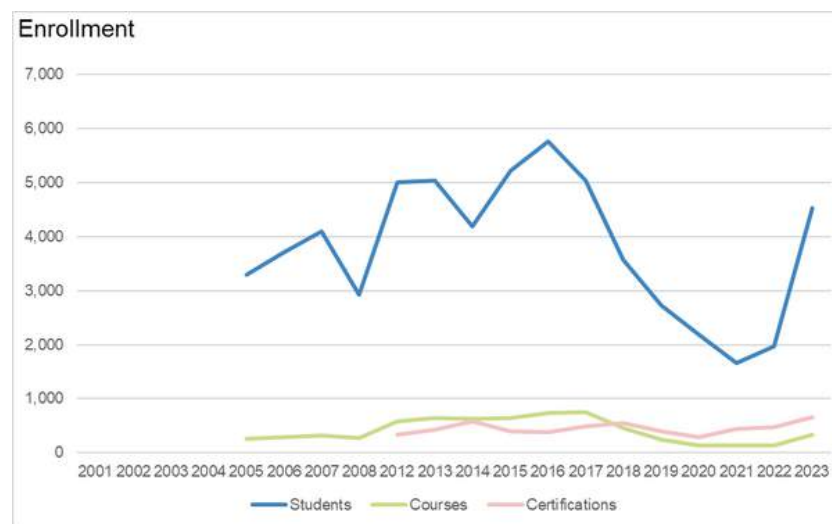


Figure 5. NSFS Enrolment, 2005-2023

Student and Course Volumes (2005 to 2023)

- Peak student volumes occurred in 2016 (5,769) and 2015 (5,225).
- Numbers plummeted post-2018, hitting a low in 2021 (1,658 students), likely due to COVID disruptions.
- A strong rebound is evident in 2023 (4,531 students), not quite back to peak levels but significant.
- Courses offered also peaked around 2016–2017, followed by steep declines through 2020 to 2022.
- 2023 shows recovery, with 340 courses offered, up from 142 in 2022.

Student-to-Course Ratio

- From 2005 to 2008, the average number of students per course hovered around 13, indicating larger class sizes or fewer specialized offerings.
- From 2012 to 2017, this ratio drops to 6.6 to 8.7, which may reflect more diversified or regionally distributed courses with smaller class sizes.
- During COVID (2020), the ratio spiked to 16.94, suggesting limited courses serving larger groups, perhaps virtually.
- In 2023, it returns to 13.33 students per course, more in line with early years.

Certifications per Student

- Lowest certification rates occurred in 2012–2016, at 7 to 9%, despite high enrollment.
- Certification efficiency peaked in 2021 at 27% and remains high in 2022 (24%) and 2023 (15%).
- The upward trend post-2018 suggests:
 - Smaller, more targeted cohorts
 - Greater focus on certification-driven training
 - Or better completion tracking/reporting

Overall Shifts in Delivery Model

- The data suggests a pivot from broad-based participation to more outcome-driven programming.
- Post-2020, there appears to be a shift toward:
 - Fewer but more efficient courses
 - A higher certification yield per participant
 - Possibly smaller group instruction returning in 2023, though with growing participant volumes

Enrollment Trends (Key Observations)

Recently uploaded to the shared site, the Course Enrollment 2014 to 2024 document provides a detailed, year-by-year snapshot of the training activities delivered by the Nova Scotia Firefighters School (NSFS) over an eleven-year period, from January 1, 2014 to December 31, 2024. It functions as a service-level inventory, capturing the volume and revenue associated with each course or offering the school provided during that time.

Each annual section includes the name of the course or service, the number of transactions, the quantity delivered (typically representing student enrollments or participant units), and the revenue generated. This includes a wide range of programming, from foundational firefighter certifications and component modules (e.g., Firefighter I and II, HazMat operations, rescue, ladders, ventilation) to more specialized industrial and marine safety training, such as Standards of Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping (STCW) certifications, confined space rescue, and industrial fire scenarios.

Leadership and professional development programs such as Fire Officer certifications, Incident Command (ICS 100/200), and instructional techniques are also tracked, as are auxiliary services like equipment rentals, accommodations, and membership dues. Pre-employment programs, including tuition and application fees, are a significant feature in earlier years but decline notably in later ones.

Overall, the document reveals a steady and then sharp decline in enrollment volumes after 2018, with course offerings narrowing and fewer participants engaging in the school’s programs. When analyzed alongside NSFS’s financial statements, this enrollment record highlights a growing disconnect between stable or rising costs and shrinking training delivery, raising concerns about operational efficiency, program breadth, and long-term sustainability. It also may reflect the trend toward regionalization of training and/or the growing discomfort with the price and results of the training provided by the NSFS.

Specific observations include:



Steady Decline in Enrollment Post-2018

Total course enrollments dropped from ~5,100 in 2018 to ~1,300 in 2024, a 75% decline over six years. This aligns with revenue declines, particularly in on-site, marine, and pre-employment training, which were formerly strong contributors.



Sharp Fall in Pre-Employment Programming

Pre-employment tuition records show over 40 to 50 students/year prior to 2020, with revenues over \$200,000 to \$300,000. In 2024, only 11 applications were recorded, matching the financial data that showed a near-total revenue collapse for this line.



Program Breadth Has Narrowed

Earlier years featured a broad range of courses including industrial, marine, hazardous materials, and specialized officer training. By 2024, most courses are core operational fire topics, with limited offerings in technical rescue, marine, or industrial fire.



Hazmat and Hybrid Vehicle Training Are Standouts

Some growth in Hazmat (especially “Introduction to Hazmat” and “Operations at Hazmat Incidents”) and Hybrid Vehicle Technology reflects relevance to emerging risks. But volume is not enough to offset broader enrollment collapse.



Fire Officer and Advanced Leadership Programs Are Minimal

Fire Officer I and II certifications are offered sporadically with low enrollment, a concern if professionalization and leadership capacity are VFM goals.

The foregoing reports on the quantitative aspects of the training provided. What is not addressed are the qualitative considerations related to outcomes and results of the training and whether any follow up or evaluation has been undertaken that would help inform future training.



4.4 Cost Per Student Analysis (2005-2024)

The cost per student trained at NSFS has varied significantly over the past two decades, reflecting shifts in enrolment, delivery model, and overall financial management. From 2005 to 2012, the nominal (unadjusted) cost per student trended downward, reaching a low of \$257 in 2012, a year that combined relatively high enrolment with moderate expenditures. This period likely reflects peak efficiency, where the fixed cost base was spread across a large number of students.

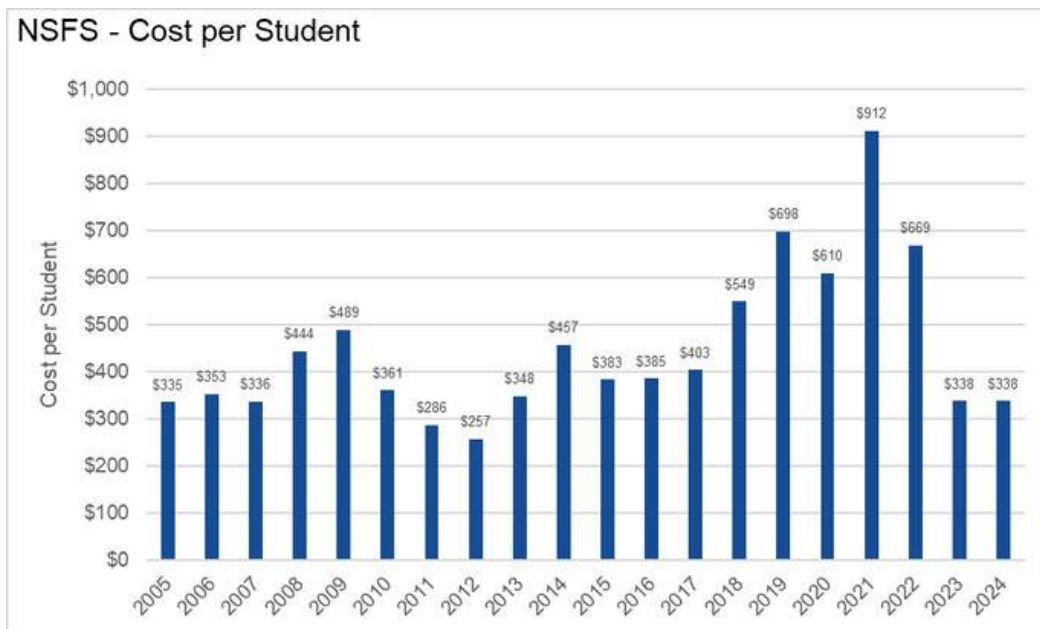


Figure 6. NSFS Cost per Student

From 2013 to 2017, cost per student stabilized in the range of \$348 to \$403, with student volumes remaining relatively strong. However, from 2018 onward, cost efficiency began to erode sharply.

By 2019, the cost per student had nearly doubled to \$698, and peaked in 2021 at \$912, coinciding with the lowest recorded student enrollment in the time series (1,658 students). These spikes reflect the combined effects of declining participation, fixed or inflexible cost structures, and likely COVID-related disruptions.

Although costs remained elevated in 2022 (\$669/student), a significant correction occurred in 2023, where cost per student fell back to \$338, the lowest level in a decade. The 2024 budget projects a similarly efficient outcome. This rebound appears driven almost entirely by recovery in student enrollment, as expenditures remained fairly stable between 2022 and 2024.

Key Observations

- **Pre-2013:** High enrolment drove low per-student costs, suggesting strong economies of scale.
- 2013 to 2017: Moderate costs with relatively stable participation. A manageable equilibrium.
- **2018 to 2022:** Severe decline in cost efficiency, primarily due to student attrition, not uncontrolled spending.
- **2023 to 2024:** Restoration of efficiency driven by volume rebound, not necessarily cost reductions.

4.4.1 Implications

The cost-per-student trends underscore how highly sensitive NSFS is to fluctuations in student volume. In the absence of flexible cost structures, declines in enrollment lead quickly to diminished cost-efficiency, as fixed expenses are spread across fewer participants.

The recent rebound in 2023 to 2024 is encouraging, per-student costs have returned to levels not seen since the early 2010s. However, this recovery is entirely volume-driven. Sustaining or improving this efficiency would require consistent or growing student numbers in the years ahead.

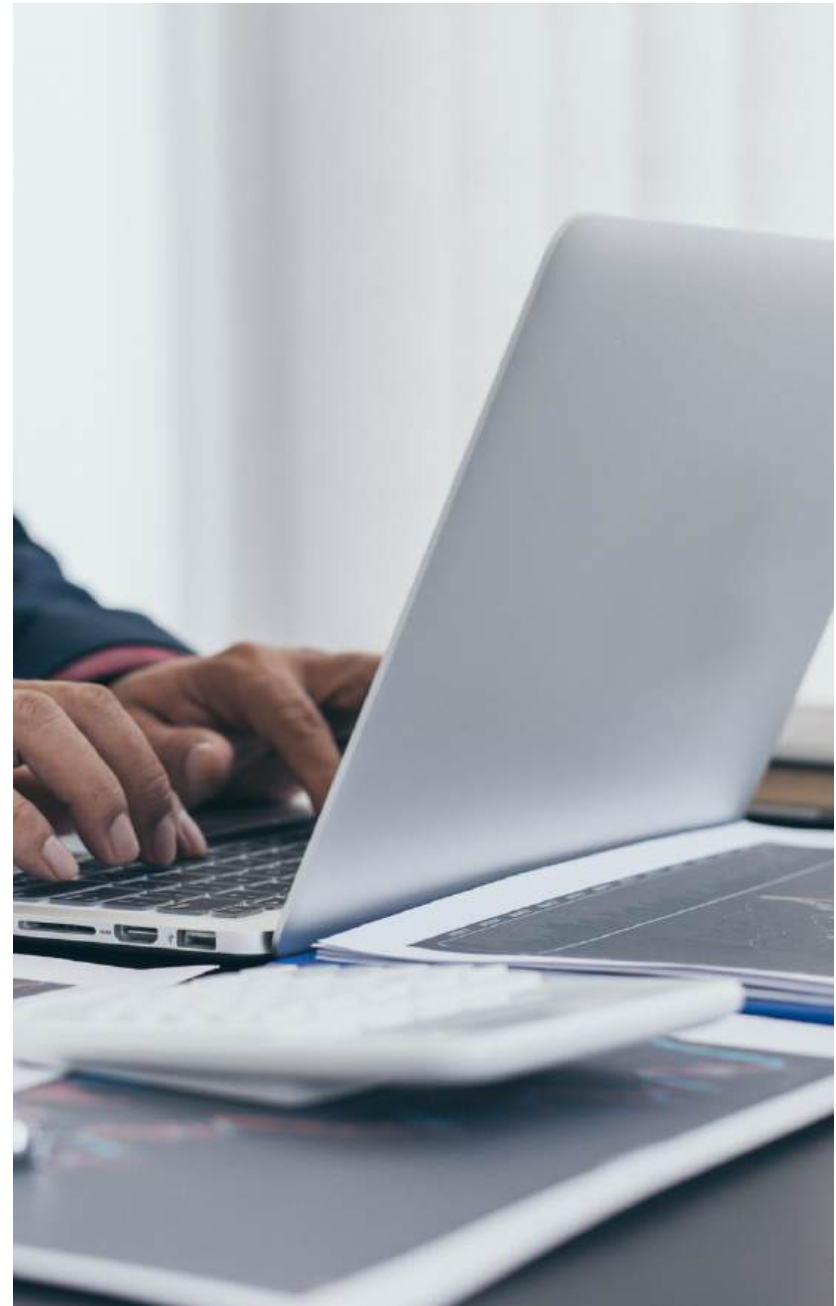
The dramatic cost spike during the COVID period highlights the vulnerabilities in the current delivery model. It reinforces the need for scalable, adaptive training systems and more robust contingency planning to manage demand shocks or operational disruptions in the future.

4.5 Time on Task

One concern repeatedly heard through the engagement process was the amount of time spent by the Executive Director on activities related to other bodies with which he is associated and has accepted leadership roles, specifically IFSAC and ProBoard. Data on days spent related to these accreditation bodies amounts to 17.6 days per year for each of the last 10 years. Some declines in allocated time were observed during COVID; however, the number of days committed to this work increased over the last 3 years with 23 days in 2022, 30 days in 2023 and 25 in 2024.

With more than 10% of the working days of the Executive Director devoted to non-core activities, this time presumably could have been spent on activities to more quickly and efficiently address the numerous deficiencies noted from various authorities (OHS, Fuel Services, PCC) and the work required to bring the NSFS back into good standing.

This is considered a failure in the governance and oversight of the Executive Board and can easily be construed as showing poor judgement and lack of commitment on the part of the Executive Director in fulfilling the duties for which he is well paid.



A photograph of firefighters in full protective gear, including helmets and jackets, working in a dark, smoky environment. The scene is illuminated by a warm, orange light, likely from a fire. The firefighters are positioned in the foreground and middle ground, with one firefighter on the right holding a hose. The background is filled with smoke and a faint light source on the left.

5 Oversight of Safety and Students

“Safety First, Always.”

- Response to Firefighter Survey

In a firefighter school, having a strong safety culture is foundational to success – for the firefighter and for the public. It’s not just important – it’s mission critical. Most importantly, it needs to be imbued in every aspect of firefighter training.

A prevalent safety culture instills the habits and mindset firefighters need to navigate life-threatening situations with discipline and awareness. It can be the difference between creating firefighters who act recklessly under pressure and those who operate with professionalism and discipline. It sets the tone for how firefighters will operate in the field. Unsafe training environments normalize risky behaviour.

Ensuring a strong safety culture is a moral obligation. It is demonstrated through leadership, consistent practices, open communication, and a deeply held belief that everyone goes home safe, during training and on every fire call thereafter. Firefighting is inherently dangerous. Even during training, students face significant physical and environmental risks. They are exposed to live fire situations with hazardous materials and heavy equipment that must perform every time. A strong safety culture helps prevent avoidable incidents.

The oversight of safety for students and staff was a very important element of the VFMA. The VFMA sought data and evidence on:

- The presence of up-to-date safety policies and procedures,
- Risk management practices,
- Training on and communication of the policies and procedures among staff and students, and
- Effective incident response, reporting and processing of results to drive lessons learned and prevention.

“The NSFS has historically been a cornerstone in delivering foundational training for fire departments across the province. However, its current value is deeply compromised. The recent training-related fatality, combined with a long-standing pattern of poor transparency, weak leadership, and lack of institutional accountability, has caused many departments to question the school's role and relevance.

Until substantial reforms are undertaken, the NSFS cannot be considered a reliable or safe partner in firefighter training.”

Stakeholder engaged for VFMA



Regular monitoring of safety matters, performance metrics and indicators of a strong accountability framework for safety across the organization. As part of the document review process the NSFS was asked to provide a copy of any policies and procedures related to staffing, safety, OSH procedures and any orders and reports associated with the inspections following the 2019 incident. The review team also derived information through its own research and the jurisdictional scan which benchmarked how other firefighter training organizations approach safety training and management in their operations.

Based on the independent, third-party reviews undertaken following the fatality, it is clear from the documentary evidence and reporting by safety authorities that the safety procedures and protocols at the NSFS were severely lacking.

Prior to March 2019, based on the documents shared as part of this VFMA, policy development on matters of safety was ad hoc, poorly conceived, and reactive based on a particular question or incident that came to the attention of NSFS instructors and staff.

Documents presented by the NSFS as 'policies' often appeared as directives sent by email to current employees. They were poorly written in ambiguous language, lacking policy rationale and intended impact, opaque in their application and not transparent to the broad range of users, particularly new staff or students.

The few documents available generally dated from 2013 to 2017. There was no evidence of these 'policies' or instructions being codified or developed with a comprehensive policy development approach, no evidence of data gathering or stakeholder

engagement, and no evidence that the 'policies' were organized in such a way as to ensure they were communicated and reinforced with new staff.

These findings are particularly problematic considering the turnover in part-time instructors. The ambiguity, opacity and lack of transparency did not support a strong culture of safety and awareness across the organization at that time.

A key question posed during this VFMA was, has the safety culture improved significantly since the 2019 tragic fatality?' The evidence is inconclusive; however, some signals are concerning.

A fatality in the workplace or training facility always evokes the intervention of outside agencies and investigators, which happened in this case. However, one would have expected that it would have also evoked a formal internal investigation as well. In fact, the review team considers it extraordinary and unusual that the Executive Committee of the Board itself did not request a formal internal investigation and ask the Executive Director to convene a full Board of Directors meeting. That would have avoided Board directors hearing about the fatality through media and would have enabled notification of the sector through the General Board members' respective networks.

Responses to questions around this point during the VFMA were opaque and somewhat defensive. The excuse given for taking this more passive, 'keep your head down' approach is attributed to the advice of legal counsel, whereas crisis communications expertise would have recommended an entirely opposite approach – the right approach to managing this tragic incident.

The review team considers the internal response and the failure to communicate the incident to stakeholders as an abdication of leadership.

Notably, the response by stakeholders during the engagement process to learn of this tragic incident through the media was very pointed and also viewed as a failure of leadership.

To be expected, following the tragic incident in 2019, the NSFS was subject to a series of inspections by OHS officers through LSI. These inspections were not complimentary toward the safety environment at the NSFS, and an extensive list of orders were issued for immediate response.

Even as late as December 2023, almost four years after the incident, the OSH officer in the report highlighted that:

“The employer could not demonstrate that a hazard assessment had been conducted to evaluate & identify potential hazards for any of the job tasks at the workplace. The employer’s safe work procedures did not address the specific hazards associated with the job tasks including but not limited to violence in the workplace, fire ground equipment, extrication equipment, personal protective equipment, fixed and portable ladders, fire extinguishers, SCBA, air compressor, fire apparatus, facility & apparatus bay area, water pump system, propane systems, drying tower, burn building, Blinn, Parker & portable buildings, Mobile burn unit, tower & pad, vehicle, dumpster, flange and helicopter prop areas for conducting live fire training evolutions and work at height.

In addition, the employer could not demonstrate that competent people were able to perform inspections on specialized equipment such as facilities, fire apparatus, fire ground pumps and LPG System.

At the time of the inspection, the NSFS had a provision for Accident / Incident Reporting Investigation in their OH&S Program. The employer provided 75 incident reports between April 2019 to December 2023. However, the incident reports provided to these officers were not completed and the employer did not have preventative measures and / or actions documented to prevent recurrences on the reports provided.”

In March 2024, an external reviewer, Safety Services Nova Scotia (SSNS), was chosen by NSFS to identify gaps in the NSFS’s occupational health and safety program. The resulting Gap Analysis Report in May 2024 identified 41 safety deficiencies or ‘infractions’ of which 22 were classified as high-risk under the Occupational Health and Safety Act, including a lack of documentation on comprehensive hazard assessments or ‘job task analyses’ completed for many of the School’s activities. These elements are foundational to the development of safe work practices. Safe work practices did not identify hazards or controls to manage the risks. Lock out/tag out procedures continued to have significant gaps. Inspection frequency and identification of corrective steps, and the need to develop pre-use inspections of equipment were identified as needing improvement. There were gaps in the orientation process for students as well as training gaps for staff.

Risks and deficiencies identified during the OHS inspections were satisfied in late September 2024. The deficiencies identified in the SSNS report were addressed through 2024.

As highlighted in the case study of the fatal incident in March 2019, the response from leadership was lacking in many respects. There is no evidence that staff have received training or engaged in discussions on lessons learned following this event to support post-incident reflection and improvement, nor is there evidence of mitigation or learning opportunities following the 75 reported incidents between April 2019 and December 2023. Responses to the OSH inspections were sluggish, delayed and implemented with an inexplicable lack of urgency.

The casual and passive manner in which the fatality was handled internally and the subsequent response of the NSFS to the directives of investigators underscores a troubling pattern that doesn't elicit confidence for the future.

In an organization that considers safety its top priority; one would typically expect to see evidence of leadership involved in monitoring and evaluating safety performance regularly such as:

- Examining near misses and reviewing patterns with staff,
- Renewing safety procedures on a regular basis and communicating these new procedures in a variety of ways,
- Hosting training events for staff focused on safety,
- Having a well-communicated system in place to encourage reporting or near-misses and student complaints and sharing feedback from students and staff with the governing Board to improve safety practices.

There was very little evidence of any of these indicators of a strong safety culture revealed during the VFMA process. Surprisingly, an employee orientation handbook that was updated in 2022, had a minimal section on safety. One small reference on page 16 of an 18-page document does not garner trust that the NSFS sees safety as paramount in its operations.

As noted in the results of the Governance and Oversight Section, notwithstanding the fact that the 2016 Bylaws were never officially filed, there is not a single mention of 'safety' and the importance of safety practices these bylaws. There is also not a 'Safety Committee' of the Board.

The serious gaps in the safety program at the NSFS prior to 2019, the lack of an improvement strategy beyond that imposed by external reviewers, the sluggish response to remedying the deficiencies and the lack of an authentic response from leadership following the fatality serve to demonstrate that the NSFS has neither a strong safety culture nor oversight mechanisms in place to ensure the safety of staff and students.



Effective oversight is not just about having policies - it's about implementation, vigilance, and a genuine commitment to creating a safe environment within a commitment of continuous improvement.

Concerns remain. As recently as August 2024, another public authority, administrators of the PCC Division of the Department of Advanced Education were not satisfied as to the safety of students and the public at the NSFS and suspended the Pre-Employment Program. As of September 2024, there remain outstanding concerns from the Fuel Safety Division of LSI regarding the use of gas props during training exercises. Almost a year later, these concerns have not yet been rectified. It is also concerning that, during an interview with the Executive Director, and included in the presentation deck as part of the court-ordered creative sentencing related to this fatality, the NSFS felt some infractions were dismissed as a paperwork alignment exercise.

If the fatality was not sufficient to change behaviour and to cause the School to actively and demonstrably commit to becoming a leader in firefighter training safety, considering the findings of the review of this aspect of the NSFS operations, there is little basis on which to hope for or imagine a better future.



6 Conclusions and Options

Telescoping the findings of this value for money audit relating to the five key areas that were its focus, the high-level conclusions include the following:



Systemic and Governance Failures

- The NSFS exhibits many features of a dysfunctional governance structure, including an oversized and inactive Board, unclear role integration between the Executive Committee and the General Board, and long-standing vacancies at the Board level.
- The bylaws are outdated, fail to reflect the importance of the overarching safety mandate and have generally not been publicly available, undermining transparency and accountability.
- Committees are non-existent. Key Board committees such as Finance and Audit, Safety and Oversight and Training are not in place. This is a clear failure in terms of providing oversight and accountability on critical areas like safety, finance, and compliance.
- The usual features of a well-functioning organization are completely absent. These include having a strategic plan, an integrated annual business and budget plan and an annual report on results.
- In the absence of a strong government relations plan and capital plan, the Board has allowed infrastructure to decline and has not been successful in facility and infrastructure renewal, notwithstanding the difficulties that are always extant in securing supplemental funding from public bodies.



Breakdown in Safety Accountability

- The School failed to uphold a culture of safety appropriate for high-risk firefighter training, as evidenced in the preventable death of a trainee, numerous OHS violations, and lack of compliance with NFPA 1403 standards.
- Findings subsequent to the fatality revealed serious safety-related deficiencies which, historically and currently, have not been addressed by the School in a timely manner.
- The overarching finding is that presently, a strong and well-developed and executed safety culture and the policy framework to support it does not permeate the organization.





Lack of Stakeholder Engagement

- The governance structure does not adequately represent or engage the broader firefighting community in Nova Scotia (~300 departments vs. 29 stagnant Board seats of which there are presently 14 vacancies).
- Communication with members is universally viewed by stakeholders as poor, with no reliable two-way flow of information or feedback.



Inadequate Oversight of Executive Director

- Executive management is seen as exercising disproportionate control without adequate or substantive board input or approval.
- The Executive Director's performance is not managed through annual reviews.
- There are no documented performance evaluations, delegations of authority, or accountability mechanisms for senior leadership.



Eroded Public Trust

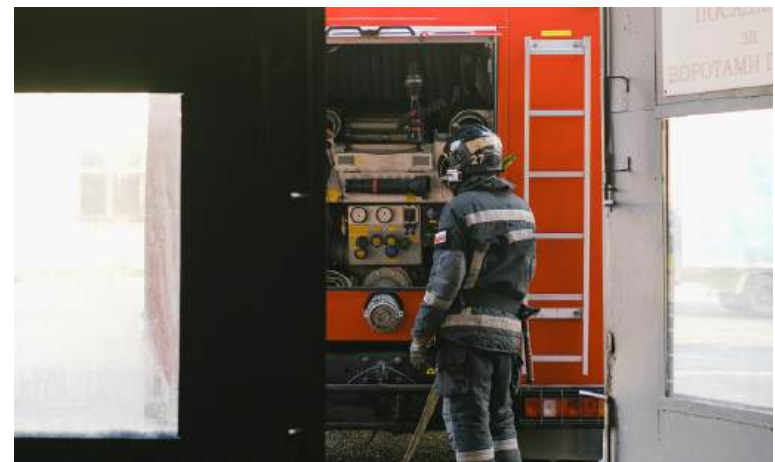
- The cumulative effect of these deficiencies has eroded trust among stakeholders, trainees, and partner organizations.
- The School is perceived as insular and resistant to reform, further isolating it from the modern firefighting community.

Not a lot to build on.

A Dynamic Environment

There are a range of broad-reaching reviews underway in the first responder space – including an overarching fire services review, the recent report on policing in Nova Scotia, as well as reviews underway on EHS Emergency Services and Ground Search and Rescue. These all have implications for supporting first responders and emergency management teams and ensuring the safety of staff, volunteers and the Nova Scotia public. Through discussions related to this review of the NSFS, it is clear that the Province is leaning in to ensuring the right staffing and supports are available in the 'first responder' environment.

VFMA Review Team



6.1 Observations

The VFMA of the NSFS is being undertaken in a very dynamic environment as detailed in the above text box.

At the time of this writing, the NSFS is not currently operational. As a result, previously scheduled near-term training has been postponed. Notwithstanding the dynamism of the current environment, considering the overarching FSANS-led review of Nova Scotia's fire services and other factors related to emergency management, there is an interest in ensuring there is ongoing firefighter training available to Nova Scotia firefighters, if only on a pro tem basis.

Also, as was evident in discussions with stakeholders during the VFMA, there has been a strong call for a more focused role for the province in Nova Scotia's fire service. Stakeholders are looking to the broader fire service review with hope that it will lead to new legislation, clear regulatory and oversight authority, defined minimum mandatory qualifications for firefighters, and a responsive certification regime.

The VFMA Report is being tabled at a time when the broader fire service review has not been completed. A report on policing in Nova Scotia has also recently been tabled and there are pending reviews on EHS Emergency Services and Ground Search and Rescue. These comprehensive reform initiatives provide the opportunity to reimagine a broader approach to emergency services training and certification. A 'hub and spoke' training model, often referenced in the survey, is one which could address both the need for a centralized location with its anticipated higher cost of infrastructure, while also being inclusive of regional delivery possibilities. Regional training is highly desired by volunteer firefighters and the municipalities which have shown strong leadership in developing their fire service response capacity.

In the meantime though, the ongoing need for firefighter training is real and growing. Being able to access appropriate training without delays or extended gaps in availability is important.



Based on the result of VFMA, the NSFS cannot safely and effectively operate as it is currently constituted and with the crisis of confidence that prevails among stakeholders in respect to its current leadership at both the Executive Committee and Executive Director levels. Even if the many shortcomings and governance gaps were addressed, reviving the NSFS may not satisfy the safety concerns and loss of trust experienced by stakeholders and clients.

Considering this factor, until final decisions are able to be taken in relation to the overall fire services review, an interim training model could be established to ensure continuity of firefighter training. As other provinces have done, this may involve forging new partnerships within Nova Scotia or Atlantic Canada as an interim or longer-term solution.

This option could include redirecting currently withheld and future grant funding away from the NSFS to another firefighter training entity on a short term or longer-term basis or as a partnership arrangement for contracted services related to completion of previously scheduled training and, potentially, ongoing training.

Each of these possible directions requires re-thinking of the governance structures and tools, facility planning and management, instructor recruitment and training, onboarding tools for staff and students with a sharp and abiding focus on safety, existing partnerships and forging new ones, building stakeholder engagement and trust. Each of these elements must be on the menu for any path forward.

Firefighters have been clear on the improvements they need:

- Safety First, Always
- Better Access and Availability
- More Qualified and Consistent Instructors
- Cost Reduction and Funding Support
- Governance and Oversight Reform
- Standardization Across Nova Scotia
- Modern Facilities and Realistic Scenarios
- Flexible, Modular Delivery
- Culture and Leadership Reform
- Inclusivity and Volunteer Recognition

Source: VFMA Firefighters Survey

6.2 Firefighter Training Certification

Throughout the VFMA, there was considerable feedback on the hegemonic approach to certification for firefighters. Most North American jurisdictions have a provincial or state body, accredited by either the IFSAC or ProBoard, to certify firefighters and provide their seals on a certificate of qualification. Many jurisdictions, like Nova Scotia, are accredited by both IFSAC and ProBoard.

As earlier noted, in Nova Scotia the accredited body, the NSFSPQB, certifies firefighters through this complex regime with five-year review cycles involving site visits from international accreditation teams in both organizations, which are based in Oklahoma and Massachusetts respectively. There is a system of hierarchy in the certification regime which requires prerequisites to move from level to level, for example, Firefighter I certification before entering Level II, then on to Level III and so on.

As referenced above, presently, the responsibility for certifying firefighters against NFPA standards to obtain IFSAC and ProBoard seals on their Certificate of Qualification lies with the NSFSPQB. The administrative support for testing services (provider proctors, conducting the testing from a randomized sample from a test bank and producing certificates) has traditionally been part of the role of the Fire Marshal's Office; however, these duties were moved to the NSFS. As firefighters may take their training from many different providers or challenge based on previous knowledge and experience, it is important that these testing services continue to be provided in some manner. It is recommended that consideration be given to returning these functions to the FMO with adequate resourcing to carry out these responsibilities in a timely manner.

This matter was raised tangentially during the engagement process. Considering the potential for a broad range of system changes arising from the fire services review and other aspects of emergency services, as a follow-up to the VFMA, this arcane and complex system may benefit from further review and renewal.

In addition, contemporary approaches to certification often include a method of prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) whereby tools are developed and delivered by a competent provider to assess prior learning and competency to enable efficient acquisition of the necessary prerequisites without having to take unnecessary and time-consuming re-training. At a time when recruitment of firefighters, particularly at the volunteer level is challenging, adoption of a PLAR framework, with appropriate safeguards, could ease the challenges associated with recruitment.

If there is sufficient value for Nova Scotia to maintain links with the international accreditation system through these U.S.-based bodies, steps should be taken to enable PLAR programming and also to ensure membership on the NSFSPQB serves Nova Scotia well.



6.3 Closing Statement

The review team owes a debt of gratitude to the stakeholders who gave so generously of their time during completion of the VFMA. Their appetite for change, their enthusiasm and candour was refreshing. Their ideas were progressive, yet realistically, also captured the myriad challenges. Their dedication to the profession is unassailable.

The review team is particularly grateful to the firefighters and fire service leadership throughout the province who spent the time to complete surveys and provide their advice and wise counsel based on experience and an earnest desire to change Nova Scotia's fire service for the better.

We're also grateful to FSANS and APPFFA for the help and guidance of their members throughout the review.

It was also helpful for the review team to review the history of the NSFS and the strategic foresight these, often volunteer, founders brought to the development of the NSFS – a noteworthy contribution to Nova Scotia's fire service. Notwithstanding the findings related to current operations, the earlier bylaws reflected a level of knowledge of good governance and the importance of safety as an integral pillar of firefighter training.

The review team also appreciated the opportunity to speak to the Blackie family who welcomed us into their home and who, in the midst of their continuing pain, shared their thoughtful insights into the importance of fundamental reform at the NSFS and in the fire service as a whole.

In completing this audit, an important conclusion the review team was left with is the enthusiastic desire to see Nova Scotia's overall fire service change and improve. Volunteer and career firefighters were equally effusive in their advocacy and relish for it.



Appendix A: Review Framework and Document Requests



Review Framework for the Nova Scotia Firefighters School

Introduction

The Nova Scotia Firefighter School (NSFS) plays a vital role in ensuring the safety and preparedness of fire service personnel across the province. As a publicly supported training institution, NSFS is entrusted with delivering high-quality, standardized, and safety-conscious education to firefighters and first responders. Considering its importance to public safety and provincial investment in operations and programming, it is essential that NSFS operates with the highest standards of governance, transparency, accountability, and fiscal stewardship.

This review framework has been developed to guide a comprehensive value-for-money analysis of the NSFS, the key elements of which are detailed below. It provides a structured approach to assess the adequacy and effectiveness of the School's governance model, oversight mechanisms, accountability practices, approach to ensuring safety of staff and students, and use of public funds. The framework also evaluates whether NSFS is delivering measurable outcomes that align with its mandate and whether its resource allocation supports sustainable operations.

Through overlapping elements including detailed document analysis, stakeholder engagement, benchmarking, and performance assessment, this review aims to identify strengths, highlight areas for improvement, and offer actionable recommendations. The findings will assist the Department of Municipal Affairs and Department of Emergency Management (DMA/DEM) and other stakeholders in making informed decisions about the School's future role, oversight structure, and funding arrangements.

1. Reference Documents

- Nova Scotia Firefighter School Bylaws, Governance Manuals and compendium of policies and procedures
- NSFS Strategic Plans and Annual Reports
- Copies of monitoring tools and output designed to monitor NSFS Board progress on goals and action plans (documents, metrics, indicators of progress)
- Financial Statements and Budgets, 5-year retrospective analysis
- Letters or correspondence from NSFS to government outlining request/s for additional funding and rationale for the proposed increases
- Training Program Curriculum and Accreditation Records including the relationship with accreditation bodies
- Spreadsheets or other summary documentation outlining the current demand for NSFS training, the numbers of people trained over the past 8 years, and projections for the next 3 years
- Occupational Health & Safety Policies and Procedures and related Incident Reports including incident management, reporting, response and follow-up actions
- Board Meeting Minutes, including Annual General Meetings and Policy Reviews
- Board policy documents such as on matters concerning code of conduct, privacy, conflict of interest, whistleblower policy, risk management, data management and cyber security, and other administrative matters

- Packages sent to Board members in advance of Board meetings (for the last 2 years of Board meetings and last 3 AGMs).
- Reports to the full NSFS Board from subcommittees or working groups of the Board for the last 3 years
- Contracts, Agreements, and MOUs with Provincial Fire Services in Nova Scotia and elsewhere
- Inspection Reports and Regulatory Compliance Records
- Records or correspondence related to Board vacancies, in particular vacancies related to members from HRM, CBRM, Truro and the Office of the Fire Marshal
- Records relating to processes over the past 3 years to fill Board vacancies
- Documents and records relating to the last 3 accreditation cycles for the NSFS, including correspondence from accreditation body or bodies
- Report on the Fire Service of Nova Scotia Standards of Service (2001)
- Past Service Reviews including the Nova Scotia Fire and Associated Services Report (2012), the Assessment of Selected Past Reports Regarding the Efficiency and Effectiveness of Nova Scotia Emergency Services (2012) and the Nova Scotia Fire Service Review (Pomax) (2016)
- Audited Financial Statements for the past 3 years

2. Review Focus

The review focuses on evaluating the following key areas of focus:

- **Governance & Oversight** - Assess whether governance and operations align with best practices for similar organizations
- **Accountability** – Assess accountability mechanisms to NSFS stakeholders including fire and emergency services providers, government partners. (Provincial, municipal), to the Executive Board and the General Board
- **Value for Money** - Assess the efficiency and effectiveness of NSFS's resource management in achieving safety and operational goals. Evaluate if outcomes justify investments and support long-term sustainability and alignment with its mandate

- **Use of Public Funds** - Assess the financial management and accountability of public funds allocated to NSFS. Determine the efficiency, transparency, and effectiveness of financial and operational management
- **Oversight of Safety of Staff and Students** - Assess the adequacy of NSFS policies, procedures, and organizational culture in promoting a safe learning and working environment. Examine the oversight structures and accountability mechanisms in place to manage physical safety, psychological well-being, emergency response preparedness, and compliance with relevant occupational health and safety legislation.

The focus of the review will be based on the development of data and evidence on which to base a quantitative and qualitative judgement of the NSFS's operational performance. The review will culminate in the provision of actionable recommendations to enhance the School's performance, sustainability, and public accountability.

3. Review Framework

This section addresses each of the four key areas of focus in the review.

3.1 Governance Framework

- The NSFS governance model as outlined in governance policies, documents and practices
- Defined roles and responsibilities for the Executive Director and Boards (Executive and General Board) and including up to date position descriptions of the staff team, a written specification for Board directors detailing their role, the Board model, its onboarding process and procedures, the organizational strategic plan, the process for annual integrated business and budget planning and recent 5-year retrospective annual business and budget plan, presence of key contemporary policies and management plans such as privacy, conflict of interest,

- whistleblower policy, risk management (the organization's risk register) data management and cyber security, among other administrative matters
- An assessment of the organization's reporting and relationship management strategies

This aspect of the review will include a detailed examination and analysis of the following:

- Governance documentation including terms of reference, charters, and policies
- Assessment of Board roles and responsibilities related to the two bodies and their respective composition, expertise, independence, and performance
- An analysis of reporting mechanisms, communications, frequency of meetings, and quality of oversight
- An analysis of HR policies, with attention to safety culture and performance evaluation
- An assessment of any potential conflicts of interest
- A gap analysis related to this aspect of the review and accompanying observations and recommendations

3.2 Accountability

Key areas of exploration include examination of:

- The mechanisms through which the NSFS is accountable to the Province, fire departments, trainees, and the public
- How NSFS activities, outcomes, and expenditures are communicated, reviewed and reported
- How the Executive Director is held accountable by the Board including annual objectives and performance appraisal

This aspect of the review will include a detailed examination and analysis of the following:

- Assessment of organizational reporting structures and performance management policies including frequency and results for the Executive Director and NSFS staff

- Examination of how the Executive Director reports to the Board and the nature/extent of ongoing communication and updating of the Board structures
- Review of inspection records and how corrective actions are being managed
- Evaluation of external communications, annual reporting and stakeholder engagement practices
- Conduct a gap analysis to identify gaps in accountability and provide recommended solutions

3.3 Value for Money

Key areas of exploration include examination of:

- Resource use, allocation and prioritization and an assessment of whether these resources, including (funding, staff, infrastructure) used efficiently and effectively
- Compensation review of the NSFS against comparable bodies
- Demonstrable safety and training outcomes through the use of performance metrics that demonstrate impact
- The NSFS's innovation quotient in providing leadership in new training approaches in response to paradigm shifts and disruption (climate change and wildfires, recruitment of volunteers, among others)
- Overall organizational sustainability operationally and financially considering the traditional revenue streams

This aspect of the review will include a detailed examination and analysis of the following:

- Map and analyze resource allocation across programs (training, administration, facilities, travel, capital planning)
- Efficiency of resource use assessment and demonstration of impact in meeting strategic plan objectives and contributing to key outcomes.
- Assessment of the effectiveness of training and safety programs against objectives the NSFS establishes for them
- Identification and corroboration of operational gaps or inefficiencies and identify proposed improvement strategies.
- Assessment of financial planning strategies and approaches to address funding source variability

3.4 Use of Public Funds

Key areas of exploration include examination of:

- How are public funds are allocated and managed at NSFS
- An assessment of the current decision-making processes and whether they are clear, transparent and accountable
- The Board's role in approving financial expenditures and an assessment of policies in place governing funding allocation and specifying financial controls (signing authorities and reporting)

This aspect of the review will include a detailed examination and analysis of the following:

- A retrospective and current analysis of financial statements and funding breakdowns
- Delineation of the internal budget decision-making process, including roles between the Executive Director and the Board
- Evaluation and alignment between fund use and strategic goals
- An assessment of internal financial controls and transparency in public reporting
- Identify improvement options for financial accountability and reporting

3.5 Oversight of Safety of Staff and Students

Key areas of exploration include examination of:

- The presence, currency, and effectiveness of NSFS occupational health and safety (OHS) policies, procedures, and incident management protocols, including those related to reporting, investigation, and follow-up actions.
- The school's ability to meet or exceed relevant regulatory standards and its alignment with provincial OHS legislation.
- Roles and responsibilities of instructors, staff, and leadership in enforcing safety protocols during live-fire and practical training exercises.
- The degree to which NSFS fosters a safety-first culture among staff, instructors, and trainees, including psychological safety and mental health supports.
- Systems for monitoring, reviewing, and responding to safety incidents or near misses, and the use of these insights for continuous improvement.

This aspect of the review will include a detailed examination and analysis of the following:

- A review of OHS policy documents, training manuals, incident reports, and internal safety audits or evaluations.
- An assessment of staff and student safety practices during training, including site inspections and equipment use protocols.
- Discussions with former instructors and students regarding safety practices and perceptions of safety culture at the school.
- An evaluation of emergency preparedness planning, including drills, risk mitigation protocols, and on-site emergency response capacity.
- Benchmarking NSFS safety protocols against those used at other provincial or national firefighter training institutions.
- A gap analysis related to this aspect of the review and accompanying observations and recommendations.

4. Methodology

Preliminary Research and Document Review: Collect and review internal policies and procedures, strategic plans, annual reports, board minutes, annual business and financial plans, financial reports, audit reports, training evaluations, inspection reports, and staff organizational charts.

Stakeholder Engagement Consultation: Conduct bi-lateral interviews with NSFS Board (Executive and General), Executive Director, NSFS instructors and key staff, the fire marshal's office, fire departments and service users, provincial regulators and funders, NSFS.

Comparative Benchmarking: Compare governance and training standards with similar fire training institutions in other provinces or jurisdictions.

5. Deliverables

The primary deliverable is a final report on the Value for Money Review that:

- Reports on key findings, identifies gaps and provides an assessment of the overall operations and governance structure of the NSFS
- Provides options and recommendations for improvement
- Identifies cost-effective governance and operational models for the future of the firefighter training service.

Value-for-Money Audit Checklist

This checklist is intended to guide a Value for Money (VFM) audit of a firefighting training facility. It evaluates the economic, efficient, and effective use of resources with a focus on financial management, operational performance, and alignment with safety and training objectives.

1. Budget and Financial Management

- Are annual budgets aligned with strategic and operational plans?
- Are there significant variances between budgeted and actual expenditures?
- Are cost overruns documented and explained with corrective actions?
- Are there clear policies on reserve funds or contingency use?

2. Resource Allocation and Cost Efficiency

- Are financial resources allocated appropriately across training, administration, and capital needs?
- What is the cost per trainee/course delivered?
- How do unit costs compare to similar training facilities?
- Is space and equipment usage optimized to minimize redundancy or underuse?

3. Staffing and Compensation

- Are staffing levels aligned with operational demand?
- Are staff salaries and benefits within industry norms?
- Are there defined roles, job descriptions, and performance metrics?
- Are instructors utilized efficiently (e.g. instructor-to-trainee ratios)?

4. Procurement and Contract Management

- Are procurement policies in place and followed?
- Are major contracts competitively tendered?
- Are vendor performance and costs monitored over time?
- Is there documentation to support procurement decisions?

5. Capital and Infrastructure Investments

- Are capital investments aligned with long-term training needs?
- Were business cases or cost-benefit analyses conducted for major purchases?
- Are facilities maintained cost-effectively and sustainably?

6. Financial Controls and Transparency

- Are internal controls in place for expenditures and approvals?
- Are financial statements and audit findings publicly reported or reviewed by the Board?
- Are there documented processes for fraud prevention and financial risk management?

7. Sustainability and Long-Term Planning

- Are funding sources diversified and stable?
- Are there long-term financial forecasts or strategic investment plans?
- Is the facility planning for replacement or upgrades of core infrastructure?

8. Training Output and Outcomes

- Are output metrics (e.g. number of trainees, pass rates) tracked over time?
- Is the effectiveness of training programs evaluated through feedback and follow-up?
- Do financial investments correlate with improved safety and training performance?
- Are training programs meeting the needs of stakeholders (e.g. fire departments, municipalities)?

NSFS Data Request Inventory

1 Training Delivery: Scope, Quality, and Outcomes

(Effectiveness)

1.1 Participation & Course Delivery Metrics

- Total # of trainees per year (last 10 years if possible)
- Number / type of courses offered per year with course length
- Number of courses delivered per type (e.g., FF I, FF II, Officer, HazMat, etc.)
- Course locations (province-wide or centralized)
- Delivery format: in-person / virtual / blended
- Course cancellations / waitlists (if tracked)
- Enrollment by courses offered per year
- Enrollment by student type (new entrant vs experienced firefighter, other)
- Enrollment by tuition type (levy-supported, student loan supported, co-pay with employer, contract with industry, etc)
- Fees charged per course offered per year (for a ten-year period)
- Current active courses (2025 to current date)

1.2 Training Delivery – Effectiveness & Outcomes

- Pass/fail rates per course and by provider type
- Attrition/dropout rates (if available)
- Post-training evaluation results (satisfaction, self-rated skill gains)
- Time to certification (length of training vs. expected standard)
- Demonstration of alignment to NFPA standards or other recognized benchmarks
- Labour market outcomes of graduates – employment directly or indirectly related to fire services
- Comparison of training outcomes across providers (e.g., NSFS vs. others)

1.3 Equity & Reach

- Geographic reach of NSFS programming (i.e., enrollment by rural/urban distribution, enrollment by County)
- Demographic data (e.g., gender, age cohort of trainees if collected)
- Barriers to participation (e.g., waitlists, cost, travel, accessibility)

2 Capacity & Infrastructure

(Efficiency)

2.1 Infrastructure & Resource Capacity Metrics

- Number and type of training facilities used (e.g., burn building, classroom, mobile units)
- Maximum student capacity per year vs. actual for each course/program
- Number of certified instructors active per year / full time and part time / turnover in same (last 10 years)
- Training equipment status: available gear vs. known deficits (e.g., aging SCBA units, trucks, props)
- Facility / equipment renewal needs (if available) and condition (i.e., estimated repair / investment if needed / deferred maintenance need)

3 Financials & Costs

(Economy)

3.1 Financial & Funding Metrics

- Typical cost per course to:
- NSFS (internal delivery cost estimate)
- Participant (tuition/fees)
- Sponsoring department or contractor (if applicable)
- Courses subsidized by the Insurance Levy (Y/N + how many annually)
- Funding breakdown: percentage of revenue from tuition vs. levy vs. other sources (estimates acceptable)
- Operating budget trends: annual revenue and expenditures (summary only)
- Training per capita cost (e.g., cost per trained firefighter annually, if calculable)

NSFS Data Request Inventory

4 Staffing & Compensation

(Efficiency + Transparency)

4.1 Salaries & Compensation by Position

- Position title (e.g., Executive Director, Training Coordinator, Instructors)
- Employment type (e.g., full-time, part-time, contract)
- Annual gross salary or hourly rate
- Total compensation per position (including benefits, if possible)
- Number of individuals per role (if multiple instructors, provide pooled data or average)
- Funding source, if known (e.g., Insurance Levy, grant-funded, earned revenue)

4.2 Position-Related Expenses

For each fiscal year, please provide available totals or best estimates for:

- Employer-paid benefits (EI, CPP, health/dental)
- Travel and accommodations for course delivery
- Per diems or instructor honoraria
- Instructor-related supplies (e.g., uniforms, PPE)
- Professional development or training for staff
- Recruitment or HR-related costs
- Any other position-specific costs

4.3 Employment Agreements

For core staff

- Current contracts
- Salaries / hourly rates per staff
- Timesheets by staff, or equivalent

4.4 Hidden Costs & Unfunded Labour

- Volunteer hours contributed to training (delivery or participation)
- Non-reimbursed costs to departments (e.g., equipment use, time off, fuel)
- Administrative burden on fire departments or learners

4.5 Costs and Time associated with non-core committee memberships and activity

- Number of days annually (for last 10 years) committed to international accreditation organizations (IFSAC and Pro Board activities outside of Province) by Staff Position

5 Procurement & Performance Oversight

(Sustainability + Governance)

5.1 Supply Chain & Procurement Information Request

Please provide any available information or documentation related to the following:

5.1.1 Procurement Processes

- Procurement policy or purchasing guidelines (formal or informal)
- Thresholds for competitive bidding or sole-source procurement
- Roles responsible for procurement decisions (e.g., Executive Director, Board, instructors)

5.1.2 Vendor Selection

- Criteria used to select vendors or suppliers (e.g., cost, availability, local sourcing, past relationships)
- Use of preferred vendors or standing offer arrangements
- Examples of competitive bids (if applicable) in the last 5 years

5.1.3 Vendor & Supplier Inventory

- List of primary vendors or suppliers used over the past 5 years
- Nature of goods/services provided (e.g., training props, gear, equipment, printing, catering, lodging)
- Annual or per-project spend per vendor (if available)
- Breakdown of local vs. out-of-province suppliers

5.1.4 Procurement Expenditures

- Total procurement spending by year (past 5 years)
- Largest or most frequent procurement categories (e.g., SCBA units, fire props, IT services)
- Any one-time or capital procurement projects (e.g., major facility upgrades)

5.2 Performance Management

- Internal KPIs or performance metrics used by NSFS (if any)
- Instructor evaluations or peer assessments
- Targets vs. actuals for training delivery, budget, participation, or satisfaction
- Changes in demand over time and how NSFS has responded

Appendix B: Summary of Firefighter Training Surveys



Summary of Firefighter Training Surveys

As one line of evidence in the overall VFM Audit of the NSFS, three targeted surveys were conducted to gather first-hand perspectives from across the fire service ecosystem. These included a:

- Firefighter Training Experience Survey: A province-wide survey of active and former firefighters across Nova Scotia (n=683), focused on training experiences, provider preferences, satisfaction levels, and emerging needs.
- Departmental Leadership Training Survey: A survey of fire chiefs, deputy chiefs, and training officers (n=52) capturing departmental perspectives on training delivery, provider performance, access barriers, and system reform priorities.
- NSFS General Board Governance Survey: A qualitative survey of General Board members of the Nova Scotia Firefighters School (n=8), examining governance structures, oversight effectiveness, board roles, and institutional accountability.

The surveys were designed to include both structured (quantitative) and open-ended (qualitative) responses across several governance, operations, and communication domains.

While not the sole source of insights applied in this analysis, these surveys were included as a value-included element of the proposed work plan and complement other components of the audit, including governance and financial reviews, benchmarking, extensive stakeholder interviews and focus sessions with key stakeholders, and an analysis of training outputs. Collectively, these lines of evidence provide an integrated and nuanced picture of how firefighter training is delivered, experienced, and valued in Nova Scotia.

Together, the survey findings offer direct insight into frontline and leadership experiences and are especially useful in identifying operational pain points, gaps in trust, and opportunities for system-wide improvement.

Survey Highlights

The following section summarizes key findings from each survey. Full data and question sets are included in the Annex. The complete processed surveys are included in a separate report for detailed examination.

Firefighter Survey

Respondents represented all 18 counties and primarily identified as volunteers, reflecting the province's rural fire service composition. While NSFS remains the most used provider for initial training, it is not the most trusted. Municipal and private training options were rated higher across almost every dimension, especially in safety, instructor quality, facilities, and value for money. Fewer than half of respondents would recommend NSFS, and a significant portion said they now avoid it entirely due to past safety incidents, poor communication, and outdated infrastructure.

About the Firefighter Survey

- 683 respondents
- 93.5% of respondents are or were firefighters.
- A strong majority (93.8%) reported still being engaged in the fire service either as volunteers (67%) or full-time personnel (27%).
- Volunteer firefighters make up the largest share, representing two-thirds of all respondents (67.1%).
- Full-time firefighters accounted for 26.8% of the total responses.
- A small number are retired (4.1%), have left the profession (0.7%), or selected "Other" (1.4%).

Key Findings from the Firefighter Survey

- **Satisfaction with NSFS was middling:** Only 52% rated their experience positively, and fewer than half would recommend NSFS to others.
- **Alternative training providers**, including municipal departments, private contractors, and out-of-province institutions, consistently outperformed NSFS on value, safety, and realism.
- **Barriers** included cost, travel, scheduling, and perceived governance failures at NSFS.
- **Top improvement priorities** included regionalized delivery, remarkably improved safety oversight, modernized equipment, leadership development, and standardized training across the province.
- **Sentiment toward NSFS was predominantly negative (~75%), especially in relation to safety culture, instructor credibility, and outdated infrastructure.**

Departmental Leadership Survey Purpose

- To gather perspectives from department leaders on firefighter training practices, preferences, gaps, and provider performance

Survey Period:

- July 2 - July 8

Respondents:

- 52 total respondents
- Representing more than 15 counties across Nova Scotia
- Roles: Primarily Fire Chiefs, Deputy Chiefs, and Training Officers
- Department Type: 100% volunteer departments

Who responded:

- 88% currently oversee or influence training decisions
- Many respondents also have personal training experience with NSFS and other providers

Departmental Leadership Survey

Senior volunteer leadership expressed similar concerns as those responding to the Firefighter Survey. While NSFS is still widely used, it is often out of necessity rather than preference. Satisfaction was highest for instructor professionalism and curriculum relevance, but lowest for cost, responsiveness, and customization. Leadership called for regional training delivery, modernization of facilities, stronger governance, and more stable public funding. Over 40% of departments said they have chosen not to use NSFS when other options were available, often citing safety, affordability, or limited course availability.

Key Findings from the Departmental Leadership Survey

- **NSFS remains widely used**, especially for Level 1 certification, but is often chosen out of necessity rather than preference.
- **Instructor quality and curriculum relevance** were viewed as NSFS strengths, but flexibility, responsiveness, and cost were consistently rated poorly.
- **Many departments rely on in-house or regional training** programs and private providers like DCI and Clerisy for customized or advanced modules.
- **Strong calls emerged for system reform**, including integration with NSCC, creation of regional training hubs, and provincial funding for core training.
- **Top training gaps** identified include access to live fire training, leadership development, wildland firefighting, and affordable Level 1 and 2 certification.

The Leadership Survey reveals a system under stress. Volunteer departments want quality training but face access, affordability, and trust challenges. While NSFS remains central, many see the need for modernization, regionalization, and greater public investment to meet today's demands.

NSFS General Board Survey

Almost all of the Directors of the General Board responded to the survey, and their feedback was scathing. Many described the Board as being too large, as well as ineffective, with decision-making centralized in the Executive Director. Financial information was described as confusing and inaccessible to laypersons. Several respondents expressed deep frustration over lack of accountability and transparency, particularly in relation to safety oversight and the handling of past incidents. There is, however, a spirit of hopefulness that the VFMA will result in positive changes.

Key Findings from the General Board Survey

- **Board governance is widely seen as ineffective**, with poor onboarding, lack of and confusing financials, and limited strategic engagement.
- **The Executive Director was described as overly dominant**, with board members perception being that they are often left to “ratify” decisions rather than govern.
- **Recommendations** included downsizing the board, clarifying roles, improving meeting management, simplifying financial reporting, and considering provincial oversight.
- **There is deep concern over the school’s credibility, including unresolved issues related to safety, accountability, and stakeholder trust.**
- Despite challenges, **board members expressed optimism**, remain hopeful and share a strong appetite for reform.

About the General Board Survey

Purpose

- To assess governance practices, board engagement, institutional oversight, and the relationship between the General Board, Executive Board, and Executive Director.

Target Group:

- Members of the NSFS General Board, who have fiduciary and oversight responsibilities for the School.

Format:

- Mixed-method online survey including both structured questions and open-text responses.

Survey Period:

- July 1st to July 7th

Number of Respondents:

- 8 General Board members

Topics Explored:

- Board onboarding and role clarity
- Participation in meetings and committees
- Access to financial and strategic documents
- Perceptions of board effectiveness and leadership
- Communication with represented stakeholders
- Views on governance reform and institutional accountability

Cross-Survey Conclusion

Across all three surveys, the findings are remarkably aligned: the firefighter training system in Nova Scotia is under significant strain. While NSFS plays a central role, confidence in the institution is low and trust has been deeply eroded. Departments and individuals continue to rely on NSFS because they have few other choices, not because it is delivering a superior training experience.

There is a strong appetite for structural reform and a modernized system that better reflects today's realities, particularly for volunteer and rural departments. The current system is perceived as centralized, rigid, and insufficiently accountable, with serious concerns about cost, safety, and capacity. Importantly, firefighters and leadership alike are not rejecting the idea of a provincial training provider, they are calling for it to be improved, restructured, and reoriented toward community and operational realities.

Considerations Emerging from the Surveys

While each survey was designed with a distinct audience in mind, their findings point in a shared direction: firefighter training in Nova Scotia is facing a crisis of confidence.

Respondents were not only forthcoming about the challenges they've encountered, but they were also clear in articulating what needs to change. Across all three groups -firefighters, departmental leaders, and board members - there is a striking degree of alignment on both the sources of dysfunction and the reforms needed to restore trust, relevance, and effectiveness.

The following considerations are grounded in this collective feedback and represent key areas where, from the perspective of those who participated in the survey, targeted action could have the greatest system-wide impact:

- **Establish Provincial Training Standards and Oversight:** Create consistent minimum standards for training and certification, with centralized oversight (e.g., Fire Marshal or Department of Emergency Management) to ensure equity, quality, and accountability across all departments.
- **Regionalize Training Delivery:** Invest in mobile training units and regional hubs, ideally in partnership with NSCC or municipalities. This would reduce cost and travel barriers and improve access to critical training such as Live Fire, Level 1/2, and leadership development.
- **Reform NSFS Governance and Operational Model:** Downsize and professionalize the Board, clarify the division of roles between the Executive Director and the Board, and improve transparency in financial reporting and decision-making. Consider alternate delivery models, including integration into public institutions.
- **Rebuild Trust Through Safety and Instructor Reform:** Prioritize the hiring and retention of qualified, experienced instructors. Introduce third-party safety audits, invest in modern training props and facilities, and implement trauma-informed protocols in light of past incidents.
- **Stabilize Public Funding for Volunteer Training:** Revisit the use of the insurance levy or other provincial mechanisms to ensure sustainable, no-cost training for volunteer firefighters. This would level the playing field and reduce reliance on self-funded or ad hoc training approaches.



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