

Paul Hedley QFSM
Chief Fire Officer
Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service

John Riddle
Chair
Northumberland Fire and Rescue Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Hedley and Cllr Riddle,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: NORTHUMBERLAND FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

In August 2020, we were commissioned by the Home Secretary to inspect how fire and rescue services in England are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. This letter sets out our assessment of the effectiveness of your service's response to the pandemic.

2. The pandemic is a global event that has affected everyone and every organisation. Fire and rescue services have had to continue to provide a service to the public and, like every other public service, have had to do so within the restrictions imposed.

3. For this inspection, we were asked by the Home Secretary to consider what is working well and what is being learned; how the fire sector is responding to the COVID-19 crisis; how fire services are dealing with the problems they face; and what changes are likely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. We recognise that the pandemic is not over and as such this inspection concerns the service's initial response.

4. I am grateful for the positive and constructive way your service engaged with our inspection. I am also very grateful to your service for the positive contribution you have made to your community during the pandemic. We inspected your service between 12 and 23 October 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

5. In relation to your service, Northumbria Local Resilience Forum (LRF) declared a major incident on 25 March 2020.

6. In summary, the service adapted and responded to the pandemic effectively. It provided support to Northumberland County Council and Northumbria LRF, with advice and resources to ensure effective command and control was put in place to co-ordinate the local response.

The service took steps to ensure its own control room and fire stations remained available as normal by taking measures to reduce the risk of frontline staff contracting the virus.

7. The service was able to continue to safely provide fire prevention advice to the most vulnerable members of the community by adapting its approach and ensuring all staff were equipped with the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE). It was also able to continue to engage with businesses by using virtual seminars and carrying out physical site visits to commercial premises where the risk demanded it. However, it was slow to adopt national guidance for protection activity and, as a result, undertook less activity than we would expect during the period we inspected.

8. In addition, the service offered support with ambulance driving and the packaging and delivery of food, medicines and other essential items to vulnerable members of the community. While additional ambulance drivers were thankfully not required, the service did play a key role, along with other council staff, in organising and delivering food parcels from a community hub based in Blyth.

9. The service was also able to continue with existing plans to develop its IT infrastructure and workforce plans to recruit and train new firefighters and control staff, to maintain provision of the service through COVID-19 and beyond.

10. We recognise that the arrangements for managing the pandemic may carry on for some time, and that the service is now planning for the future. In order to be as efficient and effective as possible, Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service should focus on the following areas:

(a) It should update its community risk profiles, of both people and premises, to take account of the changes the pandemic has caused. It should make sure that its prevention and protection activity remains focused on those areas at highest risk.

(b) It should determine what steps it needs to take to implement any future changes to the National Fire Chiefs Council's (NFCC's) guidance on protection in a timely manner.

(c) It should make sure wholtime firefighters are fully productive, while minimising the risk of them contracting or spreading the virus.

Preparing for the pandemic

11. In line with good governance, the service had a pandemic flu plan and business continuity plans in place that were in date. These plans were activated. They were detailed enough to enable the service to make an effective initial response, but understandably they didn't anticipate and mitigate all the risks presented by COVID-19. They have been reviewed to reflect the changing situation and what has been learned during the pandemic.

12. The plans now include further detail on response and support functions, social distancing, making premises COVID secure, remote working, mutual aid and supply of PPE.

Fulfilling statutory functions

13. The main functions of a fire and rescue service are firefighting, promoting fire safety through prevention and protection (making sure building owners comply with fire safety legislation), rescuing people in road traffic collisions, and responding to emergencies.

14. The service has continued to provide its core statutory functions throughout the pandemic, broadly in line with advice from the NFCC. However, the service was slow to adopt national guidance for protection activities due to the decision to suspend all prevention and protection activities at the start of the pandemic. The service did continue with the recruitment of three control staff and held its first internal training course for wholetime firefighters in 40 years.

Response

15. The service told us that between 1 April and 30 June 2020 it attended broadly the same number of incidents as it did during the same period in 2019.

16. The overall availability of fire engines was better during the pandemic than it was during the same period in 2019. Between 1 April and 30 June 2020, the service's overall average fire engine availability was 96 percent compared with 88 percent during the same period in 2019. This was as a result of an increased number of on-call firefighters being available to respond to emergencies due to being furloughed from their primary employment, and staff who are self-employed not being as busy due to lockdown restrictions.

17. The service changed how it responded to incidents. While still crewing fire engines with six on-call firefighters, two travelled in a separate vehicle to maintain social distancing.

18. The service told us that its average response time to fires remained broadly the same during the pandemic compared with the same period in 2019. This may not be reflected in [official data recently published by the Home Office](#), because services don't all collect and calculate their data the same way.

19. The service had good arrangements in place to make sure that its control room had enough staff during the pandemic. These included effective resilience arrangements, such as the early decision to insulate control room staff from direct contact with other staff members; continuing with the recruitment and training of three new staff; ensuring minimum staffing levels; and reviewing fallback arrangements with Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service.

Prevention

20. The NFCC issued guidance explaining how services should take a risk-based approach to continuing prevention activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. The service broadly adopted this guidance.

21. The service conducted fewer safe and well visits than it would normally undertake. It reviewed which individuals and groups it considered to be at an increased risk from fire as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

22. The service decided to continue offering face-to-face safe and well visits on a risk-assessed basis and provided staff with suitable PPE. It introduced the option of a safe and well visit by telephone instead of face to face. It also introduced other options, including providing smoke alarms for home owners and others to install.

Protection

23. The NFCC issued guidance on how to continue protection activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes maintaining a risk-based approach, completing desktop audits and issuing enforcement notices electronically. The service was slow to adopt this guidance, but broadly followed it eventually.

24. The service didn't review how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic.

25. The service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it would normally undertake. It decided to stop face-to-face fire safety audits and enforcement activity while risk assessments and national guidance were developed to protect staff. It introduced risk-based desktop appraisals instead of face-to-face audits to minimise face-to-face contact between members of staff and the public.

26. The service continued with enforcement activities and did continue to respond to statutory building control consultations. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as using telephone or email to make the initial contact and reducing the number of staff carrying out visits.

Staff health and safety and wellbeing

27. Staff wellbeing was a clear priority for the service during the pandemic. It identified wellbeing problems and responded to any concerns and further needs. Senior leaders actively promoted wellbeing services and encouraged staff to discuss any worries they had.

28. Most staff survey respondents told us that they could access services to support their mental wellbeing if needed. Support put in place for staff included a personalised risk assessment for every member of staff, as well as a dedicated COVID helpline and email address, and access to occupational health services, counselling and peer support.

29. Staff most at risk from COVID-19 were identified effectively. The service worked with staff to develop and implement processes to manage the risk. Each member of staff had a personalised risk assessment that was used to identify those at higher risk so that bespoke arrangements could be put in place, such as working from home and regular wellbeing checks from line managers.

30. Wellbeing best practice was also shared with other services. The service has discussed with its staff how it should plan for the potential longer-term effects of COVID-19 on its workforce.

31. The service made sure that firefighters were competent to do their work during the pandemic. This included keeping up to date with most of the firefighter fitness requirements.

32. The service assessed the risks of new work to make sure its staff had the skills and equipment needed to work safely and effectively. It provided its workforce with suitable PPE on time. It participated in the national fire sector scheme to procure PPE, which allowed it to achieve value for money.

Staff absence

33. Absences have decreased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of shifts lost due to sickness absence between 1 April and 30 June 2020 decreased by 24 percent compared with the same period in 2019.

34. The service updated the absence policy so that it could better manage staff wellbeing and health and safety, and make more effective decisions on how to allocate work. This included information about recording absences, self-isolation and shielding. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

Staff engagement

35. Most staff survey respondents told us that the service provided regular and relevant communication to all staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included regular virtual team meetings, written correspondence and regular operational bulletins about wellbeing and health and safety.

36. The service intends to maintain changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19, including virtual team meetings and a revised version of the COVID email helpline.

Working with others, and making changes locally

37. To protect communities, fire and rescue service staff were encouraged to carry out extra roles beyond their core duties. This was to support other local blue light services and other public service providers that were experiencing high levels of demand, and to offer other support to its communities. The service carried out the following new activities: moving bodies, assisting vulnerable people, delivering PPE, and packing food for vulnerable people.

38. A national 'tripartite agreement' was put in place to include the new activities that firefighters could carry out during the pandemic. The agreement was between the NFCC, National Employers and the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), and specified what new roles firefighters could provide during the pandemic. Each service then consulted locally on the specific work it had been asked to support, to agree how to address any health and safety requirements, including risk assessments. If public sector partners requested further support from services with additional roles that were outside the tripartite agreement, the specifics would need to be agreed nationally before the work could begin.

39. The service consulted locally to implement the tripartite agreement with the FBU and the Fire Officers Association. Most of the new work done by the service under the tripartite agreement was agreed in time for it to start promptly and in line with the request from the partner agency.

40. All new work, including that done under the tripartite agreement, was risk-assessed and complied with the health and safety requirements.

41. An extra allowance was not paid to staff who volunteered for new roles.

42. The service hasn't yet fully reviewed and evaluated its activities to support other organisations during this period. It hasn't identified which to continue.

Local resilience forum

43. To keep the public safe, fire and rescue services work with other organisations to assess the risk of an emergency, and to maintain plans for responding to one. To do so, the service should be an integrated and active member of its LRF. Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service is an active member of Northumbria LRF. The service told us that the LRF's arrangements were generally suitable but it experienced difficulties working with local partners in the early stages of the pandemic while formal structures were being established.

44. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the service actively supported the strategic co-ordinating group and tactical co-ordinating group. It was also a member of the excess deaths management group. The service was able to allocate suitably qualified staff to participate in these groups without affecting its core duties.

Use of resources

45. The service's financial position hasn't yet been significantly affected by the pandemic.

46. The service is part of the county council. It has made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. At the time of inspection, its main extra costs were PPE (£20,000), cleaning of premises (£19,000) and fuel (£1,000). It fully understands the effect this will have on its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings. Where possible, it has exploited opportunities to make savings during this period and used them to mitigate the financial risks it has identified.

47. As part of the county council, the service has access to extra government funding to support its response and to cover the additional expenses it has incurred. It has shown how it plans to use this income efficiently, and that it mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period. At the time of inspection, the service hadn't used any council reserves to meet the extra costs that arose during this period.

48. When used, overtime was managed appropriately. The service made sure that its staff who worked overtime had enough rest between shifts.

Ways of working

49. The service changed how it operates during the pandemic. For example, it was part of a county-wide programme to develop its IT infrastructure and move to Office 365, which supported the use of MS Teams for remote working. It had the necessary IT to support remote working where appropriate. Where new IT was needed, it made sure that procurement processes achieved good value for money.

50. The service could quickly implement changes to how it operates. This allowed its staff to work flexibly and efficiently during the pandemic. The service plans to consider how to adapt its flexible working arrangements to make sure it has the right provisions in place to support a modern workforce.

51. The service has had positive feedback from staff on how they were engaged with during the pandemic. As a result, the service plans to adopt these changes in its usual procedures and consider how they can be developed further to help promote a sustainable change to its working culture.

52. The service made good use of the resources and guidance available from the NFCC to support its workforce planning, and help with its work under the tripartite agreement.

Staffing

53. The service had enough resources available to respond to the level of demand during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to reallocate resources where necessary to support the work of its partner organisations.

54. Arrangements put in place to monitor staff performance across the service were effective. This meant the service could be sure its staff were making the best contribution that they reasonably could during this period. Extra capacity was identified and reassigned to support other areas of the service and other organisations.

55. In the initial phase of the pandemic, the main role for wholetime firefighters was to provide the service's core responsibilities, while work under the tripartite agreement was done by other parts of the workforce. This approach was taken because the service felt this was the best way to ensure it had the resources it needed to meet its foreseeable risk. We expect services to keep their processes under review to make sure they use their wholetime workforces as productively as possible.

56. Work carried out under the tripartite agreement was provided by operational and non-operational staff, including those working in fire prevention and protection. The on-call workforce took on extra responsibilities covering whole-time shifts and some of the roles agreed as part of the tripartite agreement.

Governance of the service's response

57. Each fire and rescue service is overseen by a fire and rescue authority. There are several different governance arrangements in place across England, and the size of the authority varies between services. Each authority ultimately has the same function: to set the service's priorities and budget and make sure that the budget is spent wisely.

58. Members of Northumberland Fire and Rescue Authority were actively engaged in discussions with the chief fire officer on the service's ability to discharge its statutory functions during the pandemic. The service regularly updated authority members about how it was responding to the pandemic and the extra activities of its staff. This included work carried out as part of the tripartite arrangements.

59. During the pandemic, the fire and rescue authority continued to give the service proportionate oversight and scrutiny, including of its decision-making process. It did this by regularly communicating with the chief fire officer and receiving the service's written briefings.

Looking to the future

60. During the pandemic, services were able to adapt quickly to new ways of working. This meant they could respond to emergencies and take on a greater role in the community by supporting other blue light services and partner agencies. It is now essential that services use their experiences during COVID-19 as a platform for lasting reform and modernisation.

61. Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service has developed relations with local partners, including the North East Ambulance Service. The service has developed ways to engage and communicate remotely with the public and to provide fire safety messages. It has used online learning to offer child and youth education initiatives, such as the Prince's Trust programme, and has used innovative ways to ensure that businesses receive the latest and best advice, including pre-recorded learning modules, remote webinars and live-streamed Q&A sessions. The service also embraced the use of technology to support more regular and effective engagement with staff, especially on-call staff in remote areas.

62. Good practice and what worked was shared with other services through the NFCC. This includes risk assessments for carrying out prevention and protection activities and safe ways of working to continue delivering this work safely.

Next steps

63. This letter will be published on our website. We propose restarting our second round of effectiveness and efficiency fire and rescue inspections in spring 2021, when we will follow up on our findings.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'MP' followed by a stylized flourish and a diagonal line extending downwards and to the right.

Matt Parr CB

Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary