

Wendy Williams

Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services
Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary

Mark Hewitt
Chief Fire Officer
Cornwall Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor Rob Nolan
Cabinet Member for Public Protection
Cornwall Council

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Hewitt and Cllr Nolan,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: CORNWALL 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 28 September and 9 October 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

5. In relation to your service, Cornwall Council declared a major incident on 20 March 2020.

6. In summary, the service adapted well and continued to provide its core statutory functions during the first phase of the pandemic. It managed its resources effectively and made sure it maintained its ability to respond to emergencies. It kept the focus of its home and building safety work on those most at risk and introduced innovations such as remote assessments and webinars

to limit face-to-face contact. This meant the service supported the people of Cornwall well during the pandemic and helped limit the spread of the virus.

7. The service provided additional support to the community and its partners. It took a lead role in providing and distributing personal protective equipment (PPE) to care homes and NHS sites, and its on-call firefighters drove ambulances. The service's Tri-Service Safety Officers and Community Safety specialists supported Cornwall Council's work with people who were shielding. The service is considering how this partnership can be continued, so it can help to protect this particularly vulnerable group.

8. Notably, the service introduced extra measures to support its staff. It provided additional wellbeing support, particularly for those who were at higher risk of COVID-19. Flexible and remote working was offered where required. The service took advantage of additional IT equipment provided by Cornwall Council to improve communication. Staff were also able to use their own IT to access service information and systems to support flexible working.

9. 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, Cornwall Fire and Rescue Service should focus on the following areas:

(a) It should determine how it will adopt, for the longer term, the new and innovative ways of working introduced during the pandemic, to secure lasting improvements.

(b) It should consider whether the shared plans it uses (such as Cornwall Council's Pandemic Response Framework) are comprehensive enough to meet the specific needs of the service and its community. If not, the service should make sure the plans change to reflect these needs.

Preparing for the pandemic

10. In line with good governance, the service had business continuity plans in place. However, it did not have a service-specific pandemic flu plan. It activated its business continuity plans.

11. The plans 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.

12. The service has reviewed its plans to reflect the changing situation and what it has learned during the pandemic.

13. The plans now include further detail on how the service will maintain response capability if staff absences are greater than normal. These are the degradation arrangements. They cover protection and response. Guidance on social distancing and making premises 'COVID secure' was also provided.

Fulfilling statutory functions

14. 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.

15. The service has continued to provide its core statutory functions throughout the pandemic in line with advice from the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC). This means that the service has continued to respond to calls from the public and attend emergencies. It has also adapted the way it works so it can continue to offer home safety visits to particularly vulnerable people and check safety standards in the highest risk buildings. It has used telephone assessments to check if there is a need to visit, so limiting the amount of face-to-face contact.

Response

16. The service told us that between 1 April and 30 June 2020 it attended fewer incidents than it did during the same period in 2019.

17. The overall availability of fire engines was better than it was during the same period in 2019. Between 1 April and 30 June 2020, the service's average overall fire engine availability was 96.3 percent compared with 88.7 percent during the same period in 2019. We were told that 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.

18. The service introduced a different crewing level as a temporary measure during this period, with fire engines crewed by four firefighters rather than the usual five. This allowed firefighters to socially distance.

19. The service told us that it had seen a slight increase in its response time to fires during the pandemic compared with the same period in 2019. This was due to a seasonal increase in gorse and scrubland fires in remote areas of the county. When combined with reduced numbers of emergencies in most other areas, the average time taken to reach these outdoor fires increased the service's overall response time. 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.

20. The service had adequate arrangements in place to make sure that its control room had enough staff during the pandemic. These included re-engaging and re-training some recently retired control room operators to boost staffing. The service limited access to the control room to only those required to answer emergency calls to reduce the risk of staff infection.

Prevention

21. 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.

22. The service conducted fewer home fire safety checks than it normally would. The service reviewed which individuals and groups it considered to be at an increased risk from fire as a result of the pandemic. As a result of the additional information it received from Cornwall Council's shielding list, it identified people who were at increased risk of fire due to age, infirmity, isolation and other conditions related to COVID-19. The service's Tri-Service Safety Officers and Prevention team worked in partnership with Cornwall Council to provide support and offer home safety visits to these people.

23. The service decided to continue offering face-to-face home fire safety checks because it could give staff suitable PPE.

24. The service introduced the option of a home fire safety check by telephone instead of a face-to-face visit. It also introduced other options, including delivering smoke alarms for a friend or family member to fit and a brief home safety visit. This supported people who were at higher risk and limited the risk of transmitting COVID-19.

Protection

25. The NFCC issued guidance on how to continue protection activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included maintaining a risk-based approach, completing desktop audits, issuing enforcement notices electronically, and carrying out audits on premises that are at greatest risk from fire. The service adopted this guidance.

26. The service reviewed how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic. As a result, it added hotels being used as discharge lounges (see below) and buildings/sites being used as 'pop up' accommodation for homeless people. It worked with building managers and partners, which included local authority housing teams and the Department of Health and Social Care, to make sure the buildings were safe for their new use.

27. A small number of hotels in the service area were temporarily converted into 'discharge lounges', which provided care for COVID-19 patients between leaving hospital and going home. The service worked with partners and building managers to put in place suitable and reasonable fire safety measures.

28. The service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it would normally undertake. It decided to continue face-to-face fire safety audits and enforcement work because it could give staff suitable PPE. It introduced risk-based desktop appraisals as an alternative to face-to-face audits, minimising face-to-face contact between members of staff and the public.

29. The service continued to issue enforcement notices and prohibition notices, and to respond to statutory building control consultations.

30. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as doing a telephone check of buildings before it decided if a visit was required. It introduced desktop audits and used

video conferencing and webinars to provide advice to businesses and help them understand their fire safety responsibilities.

Staff health and safety and wellbeing

31. Staff wellbeing was a clear priority for the service during the pandemic. It proactively 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.

32. 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 occupational health support through Cornwall Council, counselling, newly introduced peer support and suicide awareness training, and access to external resources such as NHS advice and the Fire Fighters Charity.

33. Staff most at risk of COVID-19 were identified effectively, including those from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background and those with underlying health problems. The service worked with staff to develop and implement processes to manage the risk. Needs assessments were completed for higher-risk staff. The service worked with them to put in place alternative working arrangements, including working from home.

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

35. 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.

36. The service assessed the risks of new work to make sure its staff had the skills and equipment needed to work safely and effectively.

37. The service provided its workforce with appropriate PPE in a timely manner. It participated in the national fire sector scheme to procure PPE, which allowed it to achieve value for money.

Staff absence

38. Absences have decreased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of shifts lost due to sickness absence decreased by 5.8 percent between 1 April and 30 June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019.

39. The service issued supplementary guidance covering absence during the COVID-19 pandemic so that it could better manage staff wellbeing and health and safety, and make more effective decisions about how to allocate work. This guidance included information about recording absences, self-isolation, testing and managing fire engine crewing. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

Staff engagement

40. Most staff survey respondents told us that the service had provided regular and relevant communication to all staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included regular virtual team meetings, briefings from the chief fire officer, guidance notes and one-to-ones with a manager about wellbeing and health and safety.
41. The service has made use of virtual meeting platforms, email, messaging services, social media and telephone when communicating with on-call staff during the pandemic.
42. The service intends to maintain changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19 as part of its usual workforce engagement and health and wellbeing support, including remote working and regular health and wellbeing communications.

Working with others, and making changes locally

43. 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.
44. The service carried out the following new activities: driving ambulances, face fitting for masks to be used by frontline NHS and clinical care staff, delivering PPE, packing food supplies and delivering supplies for vulnerable people.
45. 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 specifies 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 outside the tripartite agreement, the specifics would need to be agreed nationally before the work could begin.
46. The service consulted locally with the FBU to implement the tripartite agreement. Wholetime and on-call firefighters and non-operational staff took part in additional work through the tripartite agreement (see paragraph 67).
47. Unions who represent non-operational staff, including Unison, were not included in negotiations with the service on the additional work undertaken by the staff they represent. However, these unions did form part of the wider county council industrial relations arrangements.
48. All of the new work done by the service under the tripartite agreement was agreed on time for it to start promptly and in line with the request from the partner agency.

49. There were extra requests for work by partner agencies that fell outside the tripartite agreement, including supporting Cornwall Council to contact and where necessary carry out welfare and home safety visits to people who were required to shield.

50. This work was agreed and undertaken on time and in line with the request from the partner agency.

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

52. The service hasn't yet fully reviewed and evaluated its activities to support other organisations during this period, nor has it identified which to continue.

Local resilience forum

53. To ensure public safety, 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 local resilience forum (LRF). Cornwall Fire and Rescue Service is a member of Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly LRF.

54. The service was an active member of the LRF during the pandemic. The service told us that the LRF's arrangements enabled the service to be fully engaged in the multi-agency response.

55. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the service chaired the PPE procurement and distribution cell during its initial set-up phase. It was also a member of the strategic co-ordinating group, tactical co-ordinating group, enforcement group, and warning and informing group. The service was able to allocate suitably qualified staff to participate in these groups without affecting its core duties.

Use of resources

56. The service's financial position hasn't yet been significantly affected by COVID-19.

57. The service has made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. Up until 30 September 2020 its main extra expenditure was additional staff-related costs of £228,000 and PPE, estates and cleaning costs of £80,000. 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 any financial risks it has identified.

58. Cornwall Council agreed to provide the service with £1.18m additional funding from the Government COVID-19 grant. This will be used to offset losses from unachieved savings and reduced income, along with additional staffing costs, training, PPE, and decontaminating and cleaning buildings. It has shown how it intends to use this income efficiently, and that it has mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period.

59. The service did not need to apply to Cornwall Council to access reserves during this time.

60. When used, overtime was managed appropriately. The service made sure that its staff worked according to their planned rota and took sufficient rest days. Flexi-time was closely monitored to make sure staff didn't work for extended periods.

Ways of working

61. The service changed how it operates during the pandemic. For example, wherever possible it arranged for staff to work flexibly and to access service systems and information remotely. The 'bring your own device' initiative allowed staff to use their own IT equipment for this. Staff used technology to attend virtual meetings; managers held online communications events; the chief fire officer and senior managers provided regular virtual updates for the whole organisation. The service had the necessary IT to support remote working where appropriate. Where new IT equipment was needed, it made sure that procurement processes achieved good value for money.

62. The service quickly implemented changes to how it operates. This has allowed its staff to work flexibly and efficiently. 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.

63. The service 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.

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

Staffing

65. The service had enough resources available to respond to the level of demand during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to re-allocate resources where necessary to support the work of its partner agencies.

66. 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.

67. Firefighters and staff from across the service volunteered for extra activities, including those which were part of the tripartite agreement. For example, on-call firefighters drove ambulances, wholetime firefighters delivered PPE, and prevention staff and the service's tri-service safety officers supported vulnerable people who were shielding, in partnership with Cornwall Council.

68. This approach was taken because the service felt this was the best way to make sure it had the resources it needed to meet its foreseeable risk.

69. As part of its workforce planning, the service re-engaged retired members of staff to provide resilience in its control room. The service gave enough consideration to making sure its re-engaged staff were operationally competent for the work they were asked to do. It assessed their knowledge and skill levels and provided tailored training. They also had the opportunity to work closely with existing control staff to consolidate their skills prior to taking on full duties.

Governance of the service's response

70. 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.

71. The service is overseen by Cornwall Council, with a council member given lead responsibility for the service. This lead member and the service maintained a constructive relationship during the pandemic. The service regularly updated the lead 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.

72. There were weekly phone briefings between the lead member and the chief fire officer. Additional scrutiny was provided by the Council's Strategic Director for Neighbourhoods.

Looking to the future

73. 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.

74. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Cornwall Fire and Rescue Service improved its data sharing arrangements with Cornwall Council. It recognised that this helped to identify and target people at a higher risk of fire and is looking at ways to access this data permanently. The service's support for South West Ambulance Service Foundation Trust was well received. It is now working with the Trust to restart the programme of on-call firefighters driving ambulances.

75. The service made good use of technology during the pandemic. This allowed it to improve the frequency and reach of its staff communication, particularly to on-call staff in remote areas. It plans to continue doing this and using technology to develop business engagement webinars.

76. The service actively collaborated with other fire and rescue services in the south-west. This included regular meetings between chief fire officers to exchange learning from the pandemic. Services shared good practice and information, including from their experiences of the initial stage of the pandemic. All services evaluated the activities they undertook in the tripartite agreement and the work they carried out in the community. This allowed them to share information on prevention, protection, response activities and staff wellbeing. Those involved in the collaboration produced a

case study detailing the activities of each fire and rescue service, and how each one responded to the initial phase of the pandemic.

Next steps

77. This letter will be published on our website. We propose to restart 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 blue ink that reads "Wendy Williams". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Wendy Williams

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