

John Beard  
Chief Fire Officer  
Cumbria Fire and Rescue Service

cc. Peter McCall  
Police and Crime Commissioner

24 May 2023

Dear John,

## **Cumbria Fire and Rescue Service revisit**

In June and July 2022, we inspected Cumbria Fire and Rescue Service. During the inspection, we identified two causes of concern. We shared the causes of concern with you and made the following recommendations:

### **Cause of concern**

At the time of our inspection, the service didn't have clarity about its future governance arrangements. This means the service had not clarified its financial position beyond 1 April 2023, when Cumbria County Council will cease to exist.

### **Recommendation**

By March 2023, the service should provide an update that sets out its financial position before the new governance arrangements come into effect on 1 April 2023.

### **Cause of concern**

At the time of our inspection, the service couldn't assure us that staff were maintaining risk-critical skills.

### **Recommendation**

By 31 October 2022, the service must ensure it provides, assesses and accurately records suitable operational training, and that all operational staff have the proper risk-critical skills.

You submitted documents showing how you would address the areas of concern and the recommendations. These included the service's 2023/24 budget and financial forecasts, and an action plan to improve how risk-critical skills are maintained by operational staff.

On 28 and 29 March 2023, we revisited the service to review progress. We interviewed staff responsible for the transition of governance arrangements and those responsible for developing and implementing the action plan. At the end of our visit, we shared our initial findings with you.

This letter provides an update on our findings.

## **Governance**

We found appropriate and robust governance arrangements in place to monitor progress against both causes of concern.

As chief fire officer, you have led the transition within the service. You have met regularly with the police and crime commissioner, and attended the local government reorganisation and fire transition boards.

The assistant chief fire officer has led regular meetings to monitor progress towards meeting our recommendation on risk-critical skills.

## **Action plan**

We found the detailed action plan for risk-critical skills to be well managed and implemented. Senior officers were responsible for its implementation. Tasks had deadlines and were delegated to named officers or staff. It has clearly been a priority for the service since our last inspection.

## **Progress against the causes of concern**

### **Governance arrangements and financial position**

The county council has been replaced by two unitary authorities. The police and crime commissioner is now responsible for the governance of the fire and rescue service. He has established the Cumbria Commissioner Fire and Rescue Authority (CCFRA).

The service has now set out its financial position for 2023/24. In February 2023, the CCFRA published its comprehensive medium-term financial plan. The budget was prepared to support the fire service's proposed council tax precept for 2023/24. It includes the chief financial officer's statement on the robustness of the budget, the medium-term financial plan, and the adequacy of the service's financial reserves.

Service level agreements with the new unitary authorities support services such as human resources, payroll and technology. This has enabled Cumbria Fire and Rescue Service to continue functioning from 1 April 2023.

The service acknowledges that it will need to review and improve several areas now the transition has been completed. We will be keen to see:

- the development of the CCFRA strategic plan and new [community risk management plan](#);
- revised strategies for its resources, including for fleet, estates and technology;
- whether the service has been able to increase the level of its reserves to provide greater sustainability and resilience;
- whether a balanced budget has been achieved as expected and if the transition has been a success;
- what efficiencies have been realised because of the change in governance; and
- how well the service level agreements with the unitary authorities have been working.

### **Risk-critical skills for operational staff**

The service has made good progress to address this cause of concern. It has upgraded the system it uses to record and monitor training and risk-critical skills. And it has developed a quarterly training planner to give all staff a framework to ensure they maintain their skills. Staff have been well supported through the changes and we found they were recording training appropriately.

At the time of our revisit, the new system had been operating for three months. The service acknowledges that it will take more time to be fully accepted and understood by everyone, but the initial signs are positive. The service has been unable to migrate all historical records to the upgraded system, so it shows that some staff don't have current risk-critical competencies.

Locally, supervisory and district managers monitor whether operational staff have up-to-date risk-critical competencies. The head of assurance and assistant chief fire officer monitor this across the service.

The service has developed key performance indicators for training. The training plan for 2023/24 will be monitored quarterly by the senior leadership team.

The service has reviewed and implemented policies and plans related to risk-critical skills, such as for wearing breathing apparatus and driver training. Safety measures, such as identifying firefighters in development with red peak helmets, have been communicated to staff. The service has tested that staff know and understand the new policies and procedures.

## Conclusion

We are pleased with the steps Cumbria Fire and Rescue Service has taken to address both causes of concern. We recognise the considerable work the service has completed to improve. We are also pleased to note the positive way in which staff engaged with us. They spoke positively of the support and information they had received from service leaders.

The service has now set out its financial position. And it is improving how it provides, assesses and accurately records suitable training to ensure all operational staff have the risk-critical skills they need. As a result, we now consider both causes of concern to be discharged.

Furthermore, I have changed the service's grading for overall efficiency and its work to ensure its affordability now and in the future from inadequate to requires improvement.

We will continue to monitor the service's progress as part of our next scheduled inspection of the service.

This letter will be published on our website.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M Parr', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

**Matt Parr CB**

His Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary

His Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services