

Wendy Williams

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

Lee Howell
Chief Fire Officer
Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor Sara Randall-Johnson
Chair
Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Howell and Cllr Randall-Johnson,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: DEVON AND SOMERSET 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 9 and 20 November 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

5. In relation to your service, Avon and Somerset Local Resilience Forum (LRF) and Devon, Cornwall and Isles of Scilly LRF both declared a major incident by 20 March 2020.

6. In summary, we were pleased to see how the service continued to maintain its statutory functions during the pandemic. It was innovative in reviewing its risk profiles. From an early stage, the service produced a community risk profile. It updated this weekly. The profile captured trends in

fires, as well as staff availability and how COVID-19 was impacting the service. This allowed the service to use data to refocus its activities.

7. The service worked collaboratively with its partner organisations. It supported both of its LRFs. It also seconded a principal officer to give extra support to the Devon, Cornwall and Isles of Scilly LRF. The service has a longstanding relationship with the South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust (SWASFT) through co-responding to emergencies. Many staff across the service volunteered for extra roles. The service co-ordinated the response to drive ambulances with SWASFT for the south-west region.

8. The service has been instrumental in supporting the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) in developing the guidance to pay-protect on-call firefighters. The service pay-protected its on-call workforce during the initial government furlough period to maintain its on-call response function. It also provided the NFCC with maintenance of competence options to enable services to continue their on-call training. The NFCC has adopted the guidance documents.

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. To be as efficient and effective as possible, Devon & Somerset 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 make sure wholetime firefighters are fully productive, while minimising the risk of them contracting or spreading the virus.

Preparing for the pandemic

10. In line with good governance, the service had a pandemic flu plan and business continuity plans in place, which were in date. These plans were activated.

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 what elements of the service should maintain response capability if loss of staff is greater than normal. These are degradation arrangements. They cover prevention, protection, response and support functions. The plans also include details about social distancing, making premises 'COVID-secure' and remote working.

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 NFCC. This means the service has continued to respond to calls from the public and attend emergencies. It did this by adapting its activities and working differently. It has continued to carry out home safety visits to the most vulnerable people in the community. And it has introduced desktop fire safety reviews for high-risk premises.

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 during the pandemic than it was during the same period the previous year. Between 1 April and 30 June 2020, the service's average overall fire engine availability was 93 percent, compared with 83 percent during the same period in 2019. We were told that this was as a result of lower sickness levels among staff, and more on-call firefighters being available than usual to respond to emergencies. This was due to them being furloughed from their primary employment.

18. The service didn't change its crewing models or shift patterns during this period.

19. 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.

20. The service had good arrangements in place to make sure that its control room had enough staff during the pandemic.

21. This included effective resilience arrangements, including having a partnership with Dorset & Wiltshire and Hampshire fire and rescue services, where it can redirect emergency calls where necessary. It also had a process in place with control rooms of neighbouring services to exchange daily information, should support be needed. The service isolated its own control room prior to the national lockdown.

Prevention

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

23. The service conducted fewer home safety 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. It used a triage system to identify the most vulnerable. It considered COVID-19-related risks as part of the assessment. As a result, staff carried out face-to-face home safety visits to the most vulnerable, based on a risk assessment. The service gave staff suitable personal protective equipment (PPE) for these visits. It continued to receive partner agency referrals and prioritised them when necessary.

24. The service also introduced the option of a home safety visit by telephone. The service made a total of 3,095 telephone calls to the most vulnerable, and made 237 face-to-face visits. It also contacted its most vulnerable people who had a smoke detector fitted in the last ten years, to offer them advice and support.

25. The service also adapted the way it promoted other prevention activities. It produced several online resources, including resources about road safety and school training material on fire safety. It used information from its community risk profile document to focus on specific safety campaigns. For example, it promoted specific safety messages on social media as a result of increased garden and barbecue fires.

Protection

26. 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 guidance also included carrying out audits on those premises that are at the greatest risk from fire. The service adopted this guidance.

27. The service reviewed how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic. It continued to give support and guidance to care homes, hospitals, hostels and crematories. It recognised that it was vitally important that they continued to remain in operation during the pandemic.

28. The service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it would normally undertake. It decided to continue face-to-face fire safety audits on a risk-assessed basis and gave staff suitable PPE to do this. Where appropriate, it introduced risk-based desktop audits instead of face-to-face audits to minimise face-to-face contact between members of staff and the public.

29. The service continued to issue prohibition and enforcement notices. It also continued responding to statutory building control consultations.

30. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as using telephone and email to make initial contact, completing more desktop assessments, and using still images and video to make an assessment of the premises. The service used its website and social media platforms to promote fire safety awareness and compliance. It also created a fire safety helpdesk to give advice and support to premises' responsible persons and/or business owners.

31. The service has continued to engage with those responsible for fire safety in high-risk premises with cladding similar to that at Grenfell Tower, in particular, premises where temporary evacuation procedures are in place.

32. A Nightingale hospital was built in Exeter. The service worked with the hospital's responsible person and the local authority to put in place suitable and reasonable fire safety measures.

Staff health and safety and wellbeing

33. The service considered the wellbeing needs of staff. Senior leaders actively promoted wellbeing services and encouraged staff to discuss any worries they had. The service had a dedicated COVID-19 intranet section for wellbeing support, and a principal officer contacted each wholetime watch to give daily support. Many staff worked from home. The service required these members of staff to do a display screen equipment assessment. This was to make sure they had the resources and equipment to be able to work from home.

34. 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 and external counselling services, and wellbeing officers were available to offer additional support.

35. Staff members who were most at risk from COVID-19, including those from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background and those with underlying health problems, had to self-identify before the service made reasonable adjustments. The service could have identified higher-risk staff sooner in the initial stages of the pandemic. However, in August 2020, the service introduced the Association of Local Authority Medical Advisors (ALAMA) risk assessment tool. This considers age, gender, BMI, underlying medical conditions and ethnicity. All employees have to complete this risk assessment tool and the service is making reasonable adjustments where they are needed.

36. Wellbeing information was also shared with other services across the south-west region. Currently, the service is developing plans to discuss with staff the potential longer-term effects of COVID-19 on its workforce.

37. The service made sure that firefighters were competent to do their work during the pandemic. It gave support to the NFCC to produce the guidance for on-call firefighter training. Once the service had made sure it had adequate health and safety provisions in place, it continued its on-call firefighters' weekly training. In addition, the service installed cameras in each of its fire stations to help with virtual training. The service paused firefighter fitness tests during this period, but restarted them when it was safe to do so.

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

39. The service 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.

40. In March 2020, the service acted quickly to put health and safety measures in place. These measures included cleaning arrangements following a potential COVID-19 case at a fire station. The service put operational staff into 'bubbles' to stop the spread of the virus.

Staff absence

41. Absences have decreased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of days/shifts lost due to sickness absence between 1 April and 30 June 2020 decreased by 9 percent compared with the same period in 2019.

42. The service gave its staff regular bulletins. These enabled staff to better manage their own wellbeing and health and safety. It also enabled them to make more effective decisions about how to allocate work. The bulletins included information about recording absences; flexible working; annual leave; and details about bereavement. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff either absent or self-isolating. The service has also introduced a dashboard which allows it to easily identify staff who have been affected by COVID-19.

Staff engagement

43. Most staff survey respondents, including the service's on-call workforce, told us that the service provided regular and relevant communication to all staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. The principal officers continued their staff engagement, including carrying out virtual sessions at fire stations. The service sent regular bulletins to staff. In May 2020, the service carried out its own staff survey. The survey showed positive results about staff feeling supported; staff wellbeing; and communication.

44. The service intends to maintain changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19, including maintaining some aspects of flexible and remote working.

Working with others, and making changes locally

45. 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.

46. The service carried out the following new activities: ambulance driving; delivering essential items to vulnerable persons; and face fitting for masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff who worked with COVID-19 patients. The service was prepared to train care home staff on infection prevention and control (including training them about hand hygiene, and PPE guidance and procedures) but, ultimately, this wasn't required.

47. 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 agree to engage in during the pandemic. Each service then undertook local consultations on the

specific work it had been asked to support, to agree how any health and safety requirements, including risk assessments, would be addressed. 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.

48. The service consulted locally with the FBU and the Fire and Rescue Services Association to implement the tripartite agreement.

49. Other unions were engaged, including UNISON, the Fire Officers' Association and the Fire Leaders Association, if their members were asked to do extra work, including work under the tripartite agreement.

50. 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.

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

52. Most of the work carried out in the tripartite agreement was completed by on-call firefighters and some by wholetime firefighters. Staff who volunteered for tripartite activities and worked outside of their core hours were paid at their normal hourly rate.

53. All activities to support other organisations during this period were monitored and reviewed. The service co-ordinated ambulance driving with SWASFT for the south-west region, and shared information (such as the number of incidents to which it responded). The service hasn't yet fully reviewed and identified which activities it wishes to continue.

Local resilience forum

54. 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. Devon & Somerset Fire and Rescue Service is a member of two LRFs: Avon and Somerset; and Devon, Cornwall and Isles of Scilly.

55. The service was an active member of both LRFs. It was part of both LRFs' strategic co-ordination groups, and the warning and informing groups. It was part of Avon and Somerset LRF's tactical co-ordination group. The service could allocate suitably qualified staff to participate in these groups without affecting its core duties. The service told us that the LRF arrangements enabled the service to fully engage in the multi-agency response. For example, the service made use of Middlemoor Fire Station to store and distribute PPE.

56. The service seconded a principal officer into the Devon, Cornwall and Isles of Scilly LRF to lead the strategic community support sub-group. This work was to co-ordinate the PPE and supply chains across its partner agencies. It also led on a collective effort to distribute essential supplies to vulnerable people in the south-west region. The LRF chairs spoke highly of the service and appreciated the support it gave.

Use of resources

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

58. The service has made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. 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.

59. The service received just under £1.6m of extra government funding to support its response. It spent a total of £480,494 in the initial phase of the pandemic. By 30 June 2020, most of its costs (£306,700) were spent on pay-protecting its on-call workforce. The pay protection guaranteed its on-call firefighters income for a three-month period. This helped the service in maintaining its on-call response function. SWASFT funded the ambulance driving on a cost recovery basis. The service has shown how it used this income efficiently and that it mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period.

60. The service didn't use any of its reserves to meet the extra costs that arose during this period.

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

Ways of working

62. The service changed the way in which it operates during the pandemic. For example, it developed remote working practices in its prevention and protection activities. It used virtual platforms for meetings. It added COVID-19 information to the risk information it gave to operational crews through its mobile data terminals on fire engines. This meant that crews could attend incidents knowing possible COVID-19-related risks.

63. The service was inventive in reviewing its risk profiles. It produced a community risk profile which it refreshed weekly. The document gives details about trends in fires, staff availability and how COVID-19 is impacting the service. The service identified crematories as important premises during the pandemic. It therefore increased its pre-determined attendance times and resources if responding to a fire at these premises. It also carried out operational risk visits to enable operational firefighters to be familiar with the layout of such premises.

64. The service initially faced challenges with its IT infrastructure to fully support remote working. However, this was quickly rectified as the service invested in its IT provision. It gave staff the relevant resources to enable them to work from home.

65. The senior leaders continued their fire station visits virtually. The service found the virtual visits to be effective. It will consider using them in the future. The training for on-call firefighters changed, which allowed staff to work more flexibly. The service introduced virtual sessions.

66. Communication had increased considerably and staff reported that they were able to balance their working and caring arrangements. The service removed its core hours to enable its staff to work more flexibly. 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.

67. 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

68. 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. It set up a team which focused on the staff to co-ordinate this.

69. 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. The service's performance dashboard enabled it to monitor staff performance and resources.

70. For most of the pandemic, the main role for wholetime firefighters was to provide the service's core response responsibilities. We expect services to keep their processes under review to make sure they use their wholetime workforce as productively as possible.

71. The on-call workforce took on extra responsibilities. They did this by adopting most of the roles that were agreed as part of the tripartite agreement (such as ambulance driving).

Governance of the service's response

72. 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.

73. Members of Devon & Somerset Fire and Rescue Authority were actively engaged in discussions with the chief fire officer and the service on the service's ability to discharge its statutory functions during the pandemic.

74. Members of the fire and rescue authority and the service maintained a constructive relationship during the pandemic. The service regularly updated fire and rescue 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.

75. During the pandemic, the fire and rescue authority continued to give the service proportionate oversight and scrutiny, including that 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

76. 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.

77. Devon & Somerset Fire and Rescue Service has improved its collaboration with its partners. It gave extra support to the LRFs, and co-ordinated the ambulance driving with SWASFT on behalf of the south-west region. This co-ordination was immensely appreciated by all partners.

78. The service supported the NFCC in developing guidance documents. This enabled other services across England to adopt the information. It was one of the first services to pay-protect its on-call workforce, so they didn't suffer any financial hardship during the initial stages of the pandemic. This helped the service in maintaining its on-call response function.

79. The service made full use of changing the way it provided prevention and protection activities. It introduced telephone calls to vulnerable people and triaged those who were most at risk by giving them a face-to-face home safety visit. The service changed the way it delivered protection activities and carried out telephone fire safety audits. It was innovative in its use of still images and video to conduct these audits.

80. The service plans to invest in its IT infrastructure. This will enable staff to work from home more effectively. Operational staff can use virtual platforms to continue the service's training.

81. 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 that 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 and 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

82. 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 blue ink that reads "Wendy Williams". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Wendy Williams

Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

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