

Matt Parr CB

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

Dawn Whittaker
Chief Fire Officer
East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor Roy Galley
Chair
East Sussex Fire and Rescue Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Ms Whittaker and Cllr Galley,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: EAST SUSSEX 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 2 and 13 November 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

5. In relation to your service, Sussex Local Resilience Forum (LRF) declared a major incident on 19 March 2020.

6. In summary, the service adapted its response, prevention and protection activity during the pandemic effectively. It maintained its statutory functions and provided additional support to the community during the first phase of the pandemic. Staff who weren't able to perform their

usual roles due to the impact of the pandemic were efficiently reallocated to appropriate roles in support of the community. This meant the people of East Sussex were well supported throughout the pandemic.

7. Resources were well managed and the service's financial position was largely unaffected, especially as reserves didn't have to be used to cover extra costs. The service monitored staff absences and had plans in place if resilience had become an issue.

8. It was one of the first services to have confirmed cases of COVID-19 in its local communities, and was quick to work with partners through the LRF. The service activated response plans in anticipation and adapted them throughout the pandemic. The service had to deal with large numbers of visitors to coastal areas and it has shared learning from this with partners. The service had invested in technology to support agile working before the pandemic, so it was able to introduce flexible working arrangements quickly. It is looking to develop new ways of working as a result of its experiences from dealing with COVID-19.

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, East Sussex 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 work with all staff to determine how it can identify and address any longer-term impacts COVID-19 may have on their wellbeing.

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

11. 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 the degradation arrangements. They cover prevention, protection, response and support functions, social distancing, making premises COVID-secure, remote working, mutual aid, and supply of personal protective equipment (PPE).

Fulfilling statutory functions

12. 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.

13. 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 the service has continued to respond to calls from the public and attended emergencies. It has also continued to provide prevention and protection activities, whether by telephone or face to face. As part of its pre-planning, the service set up an emergency management team to co-ordinate with the LRF strategic co-ordinating group and agree what the service would do internally and externally. A COVID working group was created at a tactical level to prioritise activities and monitor staff wellbeing.

Response

14. 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.

15. 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 average overall fire engine availability was 87.3 percent compared with 74.0 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 because of being furloughed from their primary employment.

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

17. The service told us that its average response time to fires improved during the pandemic compared with the same period in 2019. This was due to better fire engine availability and less road traffic during this period. 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.

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

19. This included effective resilience arrangements, such as training more staff for control room roles, and restricting access to the premises to staff who work there.

Prevention

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

21. The service conducted fewer home fire safety checks than it would normally undertake. It didn't review 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 home fire safety checks because it developed appropriate risk assessments and could give staff suitable PPE. The service introduced the option of a home fire safety check by telephone instead of face-to-face home fire safety

checks. It used telephone calls to assess the level of risk. It sent an information package to members of the public who were considered to be lower risk, to help them carry out their own home fire safety check. Where the service felt the risk was high, it carried out visits face to face, with appropriate risk assessments and PPE, if the person agreed to this.

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 broadly adopted this guidance.

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. Initially, it decided to stop face-to-face fire safety audits and enforcement work. 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. The service continued face-to-face audits for higher-risk premises, where there was potential need for enforcement.

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

27. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as using telephone and email to make the initial contact and completing more desktop assessments.

28. 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.

Staff health and safety and wellbeing

29. 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.

30. 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, counselling and peer support. Staff most at risk from 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. It introduced an individual personal assessment process so staff could let the service know their individual circumstances. The service works routinely with its equality, diversity and inclusion group.

31. 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.

It 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.

33. The service initially struggled to provide its workforce with suitable PPE on time. It worked with the LRF to purchase PPE. It went on to participate in the national fire sector scheme to procure PPE, which allowed it to achieve value for money.

Staff absence

34. Absences have decreased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of days lost due to sickness absence between 1 April and 30 June 2020 decreased by 55.4 percent compared with the same period in 2019.

35. 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, testing, training for managers, and bereavement. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

Staff engagement

36. 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, one-to-ones with a manager, and newsletters about wellbeing and health and safety.

37. Most on-call firefighter survey respondents told us that they received more communication than usual during the pandemic. The service made use of telephone, email and virtual meeting platforms when communicating with on-call staff during the pandemic.

38. The service intends to maintain changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19, including flexible working patterns and home working. Individual personal assessments will form part of the annual appraisal system.

Working with others, and making changes locally

39. 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.

40. The service carried out the following new activities: delivering PPE to care homes and NHS sites; and collaborating with the ambulance service to train staff to drive ambulances (although staff hadn't been required to drive ambulances at the time of our inspection).

41. 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. The service consulted locally with the FBU to implement the tripartite agreement.

42. 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.

43. There were extra requests for work by partner agencies that fell outside the tripartite agreement. For example, the service agreed for its unpaid community volunteers to start a befriending service, where they would telephone people who were vulnerable. This was based on information shared by partners that didn't have the capacity to contact these people themselves. This work was agreed and undertaken on time and in line with the request from the partner agency. All new work, including that done under the tripartite agreement, was risk-assessed and complied with health and safety requirements.

44. 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. The chief fire officer told us that the service is looking at ways in which it can collaborate with partners to better support the public. The service wants to build on its relationship with the Territorial Army, finding new ways to work together.

Local resilience forum

45. 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 – in this case the Sussex LRF. 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 fully engage in the multi-agency response.

46. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the service chaired the tactical co-ordinating group. It chaired the vulnerable people sub-group and was a member of the other sub-groups. The service was able to allocate suitably qualified staff to participate in these groups without affecting its core duties.

Use of resources

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

48. The service has made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. Its main extra costs were PPE, enhanced cleaning of its premises, and making sure it had enough IT equipment. 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. At the time of our inspection, the service had saved £39,700 on fuel and travel/subsistence as well as £100,000 on training. While this training needs to happen in the future, the service is looking at how it can make improvements in technology to deliver more cost-effective training.

49. The service received £770,000 of extra government funding to support its response. Between April and June 2020, it spent £115,000 on PPE, £70,000 on enhanced cleaning of its premises, £38,000 on IT equipment and £20,000 on staff overtime costs. It has shown how it used this income efficiently and that it mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period.

50. The service didn't use any of its reserves to meet the extra costs that arose during this period. When used, overtime was managed appropriately. The service made sure that its staff who worked overtime had enough rest between shifts.

Ways of working

51. The service changed the way in which it operates during the pandemic. For example, it improved its existing IT platforms to make sure staff had the necessary IT and equipment to support remote working. Where new IT was needed, it made sure that procurement processes achieved good value for money.

52. 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.

53. 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.

54. 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

55. 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.

56. 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.

57. As well as performing their statutory functions, wholetime firefighters volunteered for extra activities, including those under the tripartite agreement. For most 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. We expect services to keep their processes under review to make sure they use their wholetime workforces as productively as possible.

58. Although the service had increased the availability of its on-call workforce, they weren't routinely asked to do extra work during the pandemic.

Governance of the service's response

59. 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.

60. Members of East Sussex 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. Members maintained effective ways of working with the service. This made sure the service could fulfil its statutory duties as well as its extra work supporting the LRF and the tripartite arrangements. Arrangements were put in place to give authority members relevant and regular information about how the service responded to the pandemic. It made use of technology and held meetings virtually.

61. 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

62. 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.


63. East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service has built on its existing positive collaborations with the police, ambulance service and the LRF. It is looking at ways its workforce can support these organisations more permanently, especially during periods of high demand. Data sharing improved between the fire service and other public service providers. This allowed the service to identify and respond to people and property at higher risk. The service improved its existing IT. It also transformed virtual platforms and remote/agile working, which will help it become more effective and efficient. Its work on the digitisation of information for young people includes the introduction and continuation of the fire cadet scheme. This scheme is a notable achievement for the service.

64. Good practice and what worked was shared with other services through the NFCC. This includes sharing information on the increase of commercial waste burning and domestic bonfires. This information contributed to waste sites being re-opened in East Sussex. At a national level, the experiences of the service as a coastal responder were shared with services directly. The service used staff to give advice and guidance to the public on the beaches when lifeguards weren't present.

Next steps

65. 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 'M Parr', followed by a long horizontal flourish.

Matt Parr CB

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