

Jo Turton  
Chief Fire Officer  
Essex County Fire and Rescue Service

13 December 2019

Dear Jo,

## **ESSEX COUNTY FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE REVISIT**

We inspected Essex County Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) the week of 1 July 2019. During the inspection, we identified a cause of concern in how Essex County FRS keeps the public safe through the regulation of fire safety.

2. We found that Essex County FRS did not have a clear strategy for guaranteeing compliance with fire safety regulations. Audits of high-risk premises were not taking place as planned in your risk-based inspection programme, and quality assurance processes were not in place to check that they were effective. There was no clear programme for making sure operational staff are competent at inspections.
3. You submitted an action plan setting out how you plan to address our concern about fire safety. We revisited the service between 11 and 13 November 2019 to review progress against this plan.
4. During the revisit we interviewed staff responsible for implementing the action plan. This included you as the chief fire officer. We also spoke to Roger Hirst, the police, fire and crime commissioner (PFCC). At the end of the revisit we gave feedback on our findings to you both.
5. We identified a separate cause of concern in the culture of the service and the behaviour of some staff. You have submitted a separate action plan to address this. We will monitor progress against this plan as part of our inspection programme. It wasn't considered as part of this revisit.

## **Monitoring progress**

6. We found suitable governance arrangements in place for monitoring progress against your action plan. Improving fire safety in Essex is a priority for the leadership of the service. Staff involved in making improvements were clear on this and felt supported by the leadership of the service.

7. Your senior leadership team monitors progress at fortnightly meetings, which you chair. The deputy chief fire officer chairs a monthly continual improvement board that reviews progress and risks associated with the actions. An assistant chief fire officer is the senior responsible owner and they hold fortnightly meetings with action owners.

8. The cause of concern is recorded on a risk register, which is reviewed by senior leaders and the PFCC.

### **Action plan**

9. You have created an action plan to address our cause of concern about fire safety regulation. The action plan has a senior responsible owner and specific action owners. The actions are broadly described but would benefit from being set out in more detail to make each activity clear.

10. Although the action plan includes time ranges for completion (e.g. 0–6 months), dated deadlines would help to monitor progress and identify the risk of slippage. You should consider using programme management disciplines in the improvement process, to help identify critical pathways and any interdependencies between actions.

11. The service has made good progress in several actions. These are outlined below.

12. You have created extra senior leader capacity to oversee improvements by appointing an area manager for the prevention and protection functions.

13. Service managers have been briefed by chief officers on the initial findings from our inspection and causes of concern. Fire safety team staff met to discuss the findings and their views on next steps. The wider workforce will be told about the findings after our report is published.

14. A draft protection strategy has been developed and was recently considered by your senior leadership team. This draft strategy includes a definition of high-risk premises and says who should be responsible for short and full audits, and fire safety checks. The PFCC is expected to look at the strategy in December 2019.

15. A new risk-based inspection programme is being developed. But fire safety audit activity is continuing as we reported at our inspection. You should consider adopting a more targeted approach to audit activity by fire safety inspectors.

16. A number of your staff are involved in the National Fire Chiefs Council's work on the definition of risk.

17. During our inspection we identified that your fire safety team is under-resourced. There were nine vacancies, including seven business fire safety inspectors. It is pleasing to see that you have acted swiftly to address this under-resourcing, have completed a recruitment process, and are likely to fill all the inspector vacancies by January 2020.

18. Most new staff will need to undergo development to become competent and qualified, which you recognise will take time. You should consider what short-term measures could be taken to increase audit activity, for example using overtime.
19. Work on succession planning has started to build further resilience in the fire safety team over the next few years. Eleven inspectors will be appointed from the recent recruitment process should they reach the selection standard.
20. Operational staff are to be used to make revised fire safety checks. To support this change, a structured training programme comprising of six e-learning courses and a face-to-face briefing by fire safety staff has been developed. The training material is being quality assured by fire safety staff. It is proposed that the training will start from January 2020.
21. The need to improve the quality and availability of data on fire safety activity is recognised. However your computer database makes it difficult to extract management information for effective monitoring, reporting and decision making. Interim measures have been put in place to provide managers with better information.
22. Longer term, you are investing in digital transformation, and funding has been approved by the PFCC. Replacing the fire safety database is part of a wider programme. You may wish to consider how you can make quicker progress, recognising that any provision for fire safety should be aligned to the wider programme of digital transformation.

## **Conclusion**

23. Overall, we are encouraged by what we found on our revisit. It is clear that improving fire safety in Essex is a priority for the leadership of the service and the PFCC. We found suitable governance arrangements in place to monitor progress against your action plan. Funding is available to support the improvements you outline.
24. You should consider developing the action plan further with more detail and deadlines. Using programme management disciplines will help the improvement process.
25. You have acted quickly to address vacancies in the fire safety team. It will take time for these staff to become fully competent and qualified. You should consider what short-term measures would increase audit activities targeted at premises most at risk.
26. We will revisit Essex County Fire and Rescue Service in the summer of 2020 to make sure you have made satisfactory progress with your action plan, and that the service you give to the public of Essex continues to improve.
27. This letter will be published on our website alongside your service report when it is published next month.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Zoë Billingham". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'Z' and 'B'.

**Zoë Billingham**

Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary

Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services