

Darryl Keen
Chief Fire Officer
Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor Terry Hone
Chair
Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Keen and Cllr Hone,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: HERTFORDSHIRE 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 21 September and 2 October 2020. This letter summarises our findings.
5. In relation to your service, the chief fire officer, as chair of the Hertfordshire local resilience forum (LRF), declared a major incident on 25 March 2020.
6. In summary, the service adapted and responded to the pandemic effectively. It managed to maintain its statutory functions of prevention, protection and response. In addition, the fire and rescue service, in general, and the chief fire officer in particular, played a leading role in

co-ordinating the county-wide response, both within the county council and across the LRF. It has worked constructively with partner organisations to support and protect the community during the first phase of the pandemic.

7. It used its wholetime firefighters predominantly to respond to emergencies, while the increased availability of its on-call workforce gave extra support, especially to its local ambulance trust. Staff from across the service undertook additional work. This included providing help and support to vulnerable residents and those who were shielding, visiting vulnerable people and delivering essential supplies. Firefighters also drove ambulances. This meant the communities of Hertfordshire were better supported during the pandemic.

8. The service benefited from being part of the county council structure and was able to draw on its wider resources, especially the rapid roll-out of new ICT software to allow effective remote working. The service's financial position was largely unaffected. It managed resources well. Where reduced workloads freed up staff, the service reallocated those staff to the county council's 'pool'. This pool saw staff redeployed to assist other county council functions to support the COVID-19 response. The service acted swiftly to change the way it worked to protect staff, while making sure it was able to maintain its statutory functions and contribute to the LRF response to the public.

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, Hertfordshire 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 business continuity plan, flu pandemic plan and plans owned by the LRF) 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.

(c) It should identify those staff at higher risk from COVID-19, so it can put appropriate wellbeing and support provisions in place.

Preparing for the pandemic

10. In line with good governance, the service had business continuity plans in place. It didn't have its own service-specific pandemic flu plan, but it did participate in the county-wide LRF's pandemic flu framework. Although this framework didn't contain detailed plans for the response by the fire and rescue service, it did give a structure within which all responders were able to develop a combined response.

11. The fire and rescue service is part of Hertfordshire County Council. The council also has its own overarching incident response plan, covering all departments. The chief fire officer also

initiated this plan, which set up the council's incident management team to co-ordinate the local authority response.

12. The plans were detailed enough to enable the service to anticipate and mitigate the risks presented by COVID-19, including maintaining an appropriate level of fire cover and protecting its staff.

13. The service has reviewed its plans to reflect the changing situation and what it has learned during the pandemic. The county council set up a resilience board as part of its incident response plan. Fire and rescue staff led this board, to review all business continuity plans and make sure they remained fit for purpose as the pandemic developed. In particular, the service was quick to develop a series of its own 'emergency orders'. These are plans to make sure it can continue to protect the public using different operating practices and procedures to maintain its emergency response, should the need arise.

14. 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 response, control and support functions, social distancing and making premises 'COVID secure'.

Fulfilling statutory functions

15. 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.

16. 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 attend emergencies. It has continued to do home fire safety checks, albeit a significantly reduced number of them. It has limited face-to-face visits to only those who have been assessed as at the highest risk. The service has supplemented these visits with a range of community safety advice and guidance to protect the public. It has also continued with a very much reduced programme of fire safety audits. It does most of these remotely, again after assessing the risks faced by each premises.

Response

17. 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.

18. We were told the overall availability of wholetime fire engines was better than it was during the same period in 2019. Between 1 April and 30 June 2020, the service's overall fire engine availability was 84.8 percent, compared with 64.8 percent during the same period in 2019. This was as a result of lower demand and lower sickness levels among wholetime staff. More on-call crewed engines were available due to an increased number of on-call firefighters

being available to respond to emergencies because of being furloughed from their primary employment.

19. The service introduced different crewing models as a temporary measure during this period. These included reducing the number of crew on a fire engine from five firefighters to four. A fifth member attended in a separate vehicle if needed, to enable safer distancing for those travelling in the fire engine. The service also created protective 'bubbles' within each fire station. This meant that staff were only rostered within the same station (rather than being sent across the county area), to limit the risk of exposure to infection.

20. 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 was due to better fire engine availability 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.

21. The service had adequate arrangements in place to make sure that its control room had enough staff during the pandemic. This included giving refresher training to former control room staff who had moved to other parts of the service, so they could give back-up if needed. The service was also able to rely on added resilience in its control function through its existing collaboration with the East Coast and Hertfordshire Control Consortium.

Prevention

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

23. The service conducted fewer home fire safety checks than it would normally undertake. Its prevention programme has been adapted because of the pandemic, finding alternatives to personal visits wherever possible. The service reviewed which individuals and groups it considered to be at an increased risk from fire as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This additional risk assessment enabled the service to continue to offer limited home fire safety checks. Staff only visited the homes of those who were considered to be most vulnerable and at the very highest risk. The service gave telephone advice and guidance to those considered to be at less risk. It also ran targeted community safety campaigns (through mailshot and social media) to communicate as widely as possible.

24. The service continues to offer a very limited number of face-to-face home fire safety checks to those individuals at greatest risk on a risk-assessed basis and has provided staff with suitable personal protective equipment (PPE). The visits are organised so as to ensure social distancing and limit personal exposure.

25. The triage process to identify risk and offer the alternative of a home fire safety check by telephone has proved to be a successful and efficient way of using resources. The service is considering continuing to use this approach in the future.

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

27. The service didn't review how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic. Over the period we reviewed, the service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it would normally undertake. It paused its routine inspection activity. And it did only a very small number of face-to-face fire safety audits, at those premises it assessed as being the very highest risk. It moved to predominantly desktop audits and has found that there is great value in having access to documents and photographs to prepare for the audit. It intends to continue requesting documentation ahead of face-to-face audits in the future. Staff will then be more prepared and able to produce a better-quality audit.

28. The service decided to continue face-to-face fire safety audits and enforcement work, using a small number of officers it gave suitable PPE. 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 did few face-to-face audits.

29. The service didn't issue any alteration notices, enforcement notices or prohibition notices during this period, but that was because none were deemed necessary rather than the service ceasing enforcement activity. It did continue responding to statutory building control consultations.

30. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as using telephone and email to make the initial contact, completing more desktop assessments, sending and receiving still images and video electronically, using electronic documents to replace hard-copy letters, giving businesses a COVID-19 toolkit through The Better Business for All web portal, and reducing the number of staff carrying out visits.

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.

Staff health and safety and wellbeing

32. The service gave some consideration to the wellbeing needs of staff. But more could have been done to talk to staff about their needs and to identify those staff at higher risk from COVID-19, so that the right support could be put in place.

33. 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, peer support and access to external resources such as counselling. The service benefits from being part of Hertfordshire County Council. Staff have access to wider council support services.

These include an employee assistance programme offering counselling support. The service doesn't yet have plans to discuss with its staff the potential longer-term effects of COVID-19 on its workforce.

34. More could have been done to identify and address the specific needs of staff members from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background. These members of staff didn't get the tailored support that they may have needed.

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. The service provided its workforce with appropriate PPE in a timely manner and made sure that it achieved value for money. It didn't participate in the national fire sector scheme to procure PPE as it was able to access enough supplies through the county council and LRF arrangements.

Staff absence

37. The service told us staff absences have decreased compared with the same period in 2019.

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

Staff engagement

39. Most staff survey respondents told us that the service has been providing regular and relevant communication to all staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes: regular updates to the COVID-19 communication hub established on the county council's intranet; emails; virtual team meetings; and written communication with staff about wellbeing, and health and safety.

40. The service has made many changes to ways of working in response to COVID-19. The service and staff have already acknowledged some changes as improvements; the service is considering continuing to operate with these changes when it reverts to 'business as usual' in the future. These include holding virtual meetings, which enable more frequent staff engagement, involve no travelling and bring environmental benefits. The service is also considering allowing office-based staff to work from home for part of the week, which brings the benefits of a better work/life balance.

Working with others, and making changes locally

41. 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.

42. The service carried out the following new activities: driving ambulances, assisting vulnerable people, delivering food and medicines for vulnerable people, and visiting residents who were shielding to check on their welfare.

43. A national 'tripartite agreement' was put in place to include the new roles 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 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.

44. The service consulted locally to implement the tripartite agreement with the FBU and the Fire and Rescue Service Association. Unions that represent non-operational staff, including UNISON, weren't included in negotiations with the service about the additional work done by the staff they represent. However, these unions did form part of the wider county council industrial relations arrangements.

45. All new work done by the service under the tripartite agreement was agreed in time for it to start promptly and in line with the request from the partner agency. On-call firefighters volunteered to be seconded to drive ambulances during the pandemic. This work is considered to have been very worthwhile. It has supported the ambulance trust during its peaks of demand. It has also given firefighters valuable skills and experience in trauma care and driving. The work has been so worthwhile that the service is currently in discussions with the local ambulance trust with a view to continuing this support in the future, during periods of peak ambulance demand.

46. The service is serving its community well during the pandemic. There were extra requests for work by partner agencies that fell outside the tripartite agreement. The service told us this included support for the planning and delivery of approximately 130,000 food parcels to vulnerable people. The most notable contribution from the fire and rescue service came through its support to the 22,000 Hertfordshire residents who were shielding. Staff delivered essential food and medicines.

47. Staff also personally visited some 2,000 of this group who hadn't yet made contact with the council, to make sure they were safe and well. In addition, the service did a leaflet drop to all 22,000 people on the shielding list. This not only gave fire safety advice, but also advised about guarding against scams and fraudsters. Firefighters and non-operational staff did this work.

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

Local resilience forum

49. 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. Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue Service is a member of the Hertfordshire LRF.

50. The service has been a leading member of the LRF during the pandemic. It told us that the LRF's arrangements enabled the service to be fully engaged in the multi-agency response.

51. In Hertfordshire, the chief fire officer chairs the LRF. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the chief fire officer was also nominated to chair the multi-agency strategic co-ordinating group. In addition, the service was actively involved in the tactical co-ordinating groups and in most of the specific task-related sub-groups set up by the LRF. These sub-groups dealt with a range of joint operational activities, including PPE, possible fatalities, swabbing and testing, and intelligence. The service allocated suitably qualified staff to participate in these groups without affecting its core duties.

Use of resources

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

53. It has estimated the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic to be around £450,000 up to 30 June 2020. Its main extra costs were for additional PPE and extra building cleaning. It fully understands the effect this will have on its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings.

54. The service decided to charge the ambulance trust for the costs of on-call firefighters who were seconded to support the ambulance service. It did this in order to limit its extra spending. It has continued to make savings during this period, for example from lower costs in fuel and other travelling expenses. It has used the savings to offset any additional costs.

55. Because the service is part of the county council, it hasn't directly secured extra government funding for fire and rescue services. It has, however, indirectly shared the £54.5m of extra funding received by the county council. The council estimates that its total additional costs for responding to the pandemic, during the period of our inspection, are around £73m across all departments. The fire and rescue service represents a small proportion of total council spending. The financial pressures from the response to COVID-19 and the additional funding secured are aggregated across the whole of Hertfordshire County Council.

56. In line with other county council-run services, the service doesn't have its own specific financial reserves. It relies on the wider council reserves to fund unforeseen expenses. The county council expects to need to draw on reserves to cover total future budget shortfalls caused by COVID-19.

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

Ways of working

58. The service could quickly implement changes to how it operates. While the service already had in place ICT infrastructure to allow remote working, at the start of the pandemic the county council was quick to bring forward plans to upgrade video conferencing facilities so that all office-based staff could work from home safely and more effectively. The service also made use of new ICT provision to continue other activities, such as online firefighter training. And within its fire prevention work, it managed to adapt the way it offered the Prince's Trust programme for disadvantaged young people. It used online conferencing software to run the course, and even held a virtual passing-out ceremony, to make sure that participants stayed involved and attained their certificates.

59. Ahead of the national lockdown in March, the service moved from a county-wide crewing policy for wholetime firefighters to district-crewing. Eventually, it moved to station crewing so as to create station bubbles to limit the mixing of staff. It paused its routine fire inspection programme, focusing only on the highest-risk premises. It reallocated staff from this area to support the response to COVID-19 elsewhere in the service and in the LRF.

60. The service negotiated new temporary secondment contracts with the East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust for on-call firefighters. This enabled them to support the ambulance service during periods of peak demand and to cover staff shortages during the pandemic.

61. These changes to how the service operates 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.

Staffing

62. 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.

63. 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 county council operated a 'redeployment pool'. This was for staff who didn't have enough work to do due to office closures, and who could be moved elsewhere. The service identified and nominated staff who could be used through this pool.

64. In the initial phase of the pandemic, the main role for wholetime firefighters has been to provide the service's core responsibilities, while work under the tripartite agreement was done by on-call firefighters. 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. Wholetime firefighters did, however, take part in other activities not covered by the tripartite agreement, such as checking on the wellbeing of vulnerable residents who were shielding but had not requested any form of help. We expect services to keep their processes under review to make sure they use their wholetime workforces as productively as possible.

65. Wholetime firefighters did support the additional prevention activities. These included visits to check on the welfare of residents who were shielding. Other fire and rescue staff were also involved in supporting the deliveries and visits to vulnerable residents. The staff also took on roles to support LRF activities.

Governance of the service's response

66. 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.

67. Members of Hertfordshire 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 of the fire and rescue authority and the service maintained a constructive relationship.

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

69. 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.

70. Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue Service has played a leading and well-respected role in the county-wide response. It has improved its collaboration within the county council and with all LRF partner organisations. The service is considering how it might continue to support the ambulance service during periods of high demand in the future. The service as a whole has felt the benefits of a modern, reliable ICT infrastructure. Senior staff have had positive feedback about the use of virtual meetings in maintaining communication and enabling effective working. The service has also accrued significant savings in time and costs. Wherever possible, the service is planning to make remote working the default position in the future, with formerly office-based staff working from home for some of each week. It is reviewing its estates plans to accommodate this change.

71. Good practice and what worked was shared with other services, and the service is actively involved in groups within the NFCC, through which information is shared nationally. The service shares information and good practice across the LRF partner agencies and regionally with other fire services. For example, the service made a short video to inform staff about the appropriate PPE to wear. This was well received within the service, and so the service shared it with regional fire services.

Next steps

72. 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, reading "Zoë Billingham", is displayed on a light blue, textured rectangular background.

Zoë Billingham

Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary