

Mr Mark Baxter
Chief Fire Officer
Lincolnshire Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor Nick Worth
Chair
Lincolnshire Fire and Rescue Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Baxter and Cllr Worth,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: LINCOLNSHIRE 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 5 and 16 October 2020. This letter summarises our findings.
5. In relation to your service, the strategic co-ordinating group of the local resilience forum (LRF) declared a major incident on 17 March 2020.
6. In summary, while Lincolnshire Fire and Rescue Service maintained its response and prevention functions, it didn't offer the range of protection measures expected during the early stages of the pandemic. Between April and June 2020, it stopped the majority of its routine

protection activity, thereby not auditing for compliance with fire safety regulations those buildings it had identified as being at the highest risk from fire. This approach was not in line with national expectations. While this work has since restarted, at the time of our inspection it had a considerable backlog of premises to work through.

7. More positively, the fire and rescue service has a strong track record of working constructively with fellow emergency services and other partner organisations, for example in responding to major incidents such as frequent flooding in Lincolnshire. And for almost twenty years, its firefighters have been co-responding to medical emergencies.

8. The service has developed good working relationships within the LRF, which are serving the public well during the pandemic. It used its wholetime firefighters predominantly to respond to emergencies, while the increased availability of its on-call workforce provided extra support, especially to the local ambulance trust. Staff from across the service volunteered to give additional help and support to vulnerable residents through the delivery of essential supplies. The service benefited from being a part of the county council structure and was able to draw on the council's wider resources, especially the rapid roll-out of new IT software to allow effective remote working. The service's financial position is, so far, largely unaffected. The service managed resources well. It temporarily re-engaged some retired fire officers to help manage its response, support partnership work and keep operations running.

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, Lincolnshire 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 determine what steps it could take to align itself more closely with the National Fire Chiefs Council's (NFCC) guidance on protection.

(c) It should consider how well its plans allow it to maintain all its statutory functions during an extended event such as the pandemic. If needed, it should adjust its plans to make sure it can do so.

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. The service was well prepared to respond jointly with fellow emergency services and other partner organisations. It has a track record of routinely and systematically testing its plans through joint exercises and learning from previous responses to major incidents in Lincolnshire. These plans were activated at the start of the pandemic.

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. The plans now set out arrangements for a scalable response according to the nationally or locally set pandemic risk level.

13. The plans now include further detail on degradation arrangements for prevention, protection, response and support functions, social distancing, making premises 'COVID secure', hygiene and use of personal protective equipment (PPE).

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 offer its response and prevention functions throughout the pandemic. This means it has continued to respond to calls from the public and attend emergencies. It has also continued to carry out fire prevention work, focusing on people who faced the most risk of harm from fires. But it decided to completely stop its programme of fire safety audits. This was contrary to national guidance and was based on the service's view that remote audits would undermine the integrity of its fire safety programme. It did later restart the programme through the use of remote working. But we are concerned that the service compromised its ability to deliver the full range of protection activities expected during the period we are inspecting.

Response

16. 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.

17. Lincolnshire, as a predominantly rural county with sparse populations, relies very heavily on its on-call firefighters; 80 percent of firefighters are on call. The availability of wholetime fire engines was broadly the same as it was during the same period in 2019. The availability of on-call crewed 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 on-call fire engine availability was 93.7 percent compared with 87.0 percent during the same period in 2019. 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.

18. 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 statistics recently published by the Home Office](#), because services don't all collect and calculate their data the same way.

19. The service introduced different crewing arrangements as a temporary measure during this period. These included allowing individual stations to implement their own local rota systems.

The service also operated a risk-based approach to crewing, so that if the risk posed by an incident only required a crew of three on-call firefighters, only three were called in. It also had preliminary negotiations with the local Fire Brigades Union (FBU) representatives to reduce the response to specified low-risk incidents to a crew of two in the event of very severe staff shortages. This reduction wasn't formally agreed by the FBU hierarchy, but the early preparatory work was completed should it be needed.

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

21. This included effective resilience arrangements, including providing refresher training for former control room staff who had moved to other parts of the service, and fast-tracking the recruitment and induction process that was underway for new control room staff. The service could also rely on extra support for its control room function through its existing collaboration with the East Coast and Hertfordshire Control Consortium.

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 fire safety checks 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. This additional risk assessment enabled the service to continue to provide 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. Otherwise, specialist prevention staff offered appropriate advice and guidance over the telephone.

24. The service decided to continue offering a limited number of face-to-face home fire safety checks to those individuals who were at greatest risk. It did this on a risk-assessed basis and provided staff with suitable PPE. The service organises these visits ensuring social distancing and limited personal exposure.

Protection

25. The NFCC issued guidance on how to continue protection activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included 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 was slow in implementing and accepting the value of this guidance.

26. The service didn't initially review how it defined premises as high risk during the pandemic. Instead, it stopped doing any fire safety audits altogether during April, May and June 2020. This is because it decided that satisfactory audits couldn't be done without face-to-face visits, and that any

remote approach would undermine the integrity of its fire safety programme. The national guidance recommended that services review their risk-based inspection programmes, introduce desktop reviews and carry out face-to-face inspections when they were considered necessary.

27. The service has subsequently reconsidered this decision. More recently, it has implemented an approach involving telephone and desktop reviews. But the period of altogether suspending its risk-based inspection programme has left the service with a large backlog of premises that it hasn't reviewed.

28. The service didn't issue any alteration notices, enforcement notices or prohibition notices during this period. It did continue to respond to complaints and statutory building control consultations.

29. The level of protection activity that the service provided during the period we inspected was less than we expected and not in line with national guidance.

30. It introduced other measures to continue to give advice and guidance to businesses and high-risk premises, including through the LRF group that was set up specifically to support businesses through closure to their safe reopening. The service also developed generic information to send to schools, hospitals and nursing homes.

Staff health and safety and wellbeing

31. Staff wellbeing was a clear priority for the service during the pandemic. It proactively 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. The service's occupational health provider produces a fortnightly update for staff. It provided materials on mental health and wellbeing issues during the pandemic.

32. 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, peer support, council-wide diversity support groups and access to external resources such as an employee assistance programme.

33. 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 invited all staff who identified as being at heightened risk from COVID-19 to have a bespoke risk assessment to identify any tailored support that might be offered.

34. 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.

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.

37. 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.

Staff absence

38. Absences have remained stable compared with the same period in 2019. The number of days/shifts lost due to sickness absence between 1 April and 30 June 2020 increased by 0.1 percent compared with the same period in 2019.

39. 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, returning to work, and training for managers. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

Staff engagement

40. Most staff survey respondents told us that the service provided regular and relevant communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included regular virtual team meetings, daily bulletins from the silver command team, emails and one-to-one calls with a manager about wellbeing and health and safety. The county council's intranet has only limited functionality. The service had to find alternative ways to get timely general communications and messages out to staff.

41. The service has made many changes to ways of working in response to COVID-19. These include continued use of virtual meetings (to enable more frequent engagement, avoid unnecessary travel and support staff in achieving a better work/life balance). The service also intends to maximise opportunities for a blended approach to training. This will see it offering both station-based and online learning. This will particularly benefit on-call firefighters, as it will make it easier for them to complete training at times that are convenient to them.

Working with others, and making changes locally

42. 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, or to offer other support to its communities.

43. The service carried out the following new activities: driving ambulances, assisting vulnerable people and delivering PPE. On-call firefighters also volunteered for, and were trained in, preparation for moving bodies in the event of mass casualties. But ultimately, this service wasn't needed.

44. 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 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.

45. The service engaged with the FBU and the Fire and Rescue Services Association. Unions who represent non-operational staff, including UNISON, weren't included in consultations with the service on the additional work undertaken by the staff they represent. However, these unions did form part of the wider county council industrial relations arrangements.

46. 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.

47. There were limited extra requests for work by partner agencies that fell outside the tripartite agreement. The service and its staff were willing to undertake other activities, such as delivering essential supplies to vulnerable residents. However, we were told that Lincolnshire has an active voluntary sector that works in conjunction with the LRF; it could accomplish most of these additional support activities and needed only limited help from emergency responders.

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

49. The service took the decision to prioritise the use of its on-call firefighter workforce to carry out any additional duties. It made this decision on the basis that they are likely to be suffering most financial hardship, as a result of the pandemic affecting their main employment and income.

50. No extra allowances were paid to staff who volunteered for additional duties. They were paid at their normal rates of pay.

Local resilience forum

51. 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. Lincolnshire Fire and Rescue Service is a member of the Lincolnshire LRF.

52. The fire and rescue service has a strong track record of working constructively with fellow emergency services and other partner organisations in responding to major incidents, such as frequent flooding in Lincolnshire. And for almost twenty years, its firefighters have been co-responding to medical emergencies. This co-responding continued during the outbreak, with the

exception of a period of one week at the end of March while the East Midlands Ambulance Service NHS Trust resolved its concerns about the provision of adequate PPE for firefighters.

53. 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 be fully engaged in the multi-agency response. Staff and managers from the service were actively involved in a range of LRF joint activities to co-ordinate the county's response to COVID-19. They included the procurement and supply of PPE across all agencies.

54. The service has developed good working relationships within the LRF, which are serving the public well during the pandemic. The deputy chief fire officer is the vice-chair of the LRF.

Use of resources

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

56. The service has made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. It estimates that it will have spent an extra £298,000 in responding to the pandemic by the end of March 2021. Its main extra costs are for extra PPE, bespoke IT equipment and additional building cleaning. It fully understands the effect this will have on its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings.

57. 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 it had already made its agreed budget savings for 2020/21 of £115,000, as required by the council's financial plans. It has managed to find further savings up to the end of June 2020 (for example from reduced costs for training, fuel and other travelling expenses). It has used them to offset some of its extra costs.

58. Because the service is part of the county council, it hasn't directly secured extra government funding for fire and rescue services. However, it has indirectly shared in the £40m of extra funding received by the county council. From this, the council allocated £278,000 to the fire and rescue service to help cover its extra costs.

59. The service doesn't have its own specific financial reserves. It relies on the wider council reserves to fund unforeseen expenses. The county council is anticipating needing to draw on reserves to cover total future budget shortfalls caused by COVID-19.

Ways of working

60. The service changed the way in which it operates during the pandemic. At the start of the pandemic, it lacked the necessary IT infrastructure to allow remote working. However, the county council could provide new software and other equipment very quickly to facilitate home working and virtual meetings across all departments. This enabled non-operational staff to work safely and effectively from home. It also made use of new IT provision to continue other activities, such as online firefighter training. Also, on-call staff didn't need to attend fire stations for drill nights.

61. The service quickly recognised that in order to maintain an effective level of training, it needed to offer more opportunities for individuals to access training online remotely. This was so that groups of staff wouldn't need to be brought together for training sessions. The service had courses rewritten and uploaded onto web-based packages so that staff could access them from home. It blended this online training with necessary practical training, enabling operational staff to maintain appropriate levels of competence. In this way, the service managed a wholetime and on-call recruits training course from March 2020.

62. The service set up its silver command function very early in the process. This gave an invaluable link with the LRF's activities. It became the single point of contact with the whole county council. The service issued daily bulletins through silver command. The bulletins kept staff updated about all issues relating to the response to COVID-19, including amended HR policies, safety guidance and operational changes. Silver command reviewed staff availability daily in the early weeks of the pandemic. It did this fortnightly after it became apparent that staff shortages weren't an issue.

63. Lincolnshire Fire and Rescue Service is a comparatively small service. Having four re-engaged retired officers enabled it to provide its silver command function with the right staff, with the right skills, and give appropriate support to the LRF joint responses. It did this without compromising operational management.

Staffing

64. The service took steps to make sure it 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.

65. 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.

66. Although there was no shortage of volunteers for additional duties, for most of the pandemic the main role for wholetime firefighters was to provide the service's core responsibilities. Work under the tripartite agreement was done predominantly by on-call firefighters, with non-uniformed staff carrying out some tasks. We expect services to keep their processes under review to make sure they use their wholetime workforces as productively as possible.

67. This approach was taken because the service wanted to support its on-call firefighters as much as possible; it recognised that this group of its workforce was most likely to be financially disadvantaged, due to the pandemic impacting their main employment and income. Therefore, it took the view that on-call staff should be prioritised for any additional duties that were available to supplement their income. The on-call workforce took on extra responsibilities covering some of the roles agreed as part of the tripartite agreement.

68. As part of its workforce planning, the service re-engaged four retired members of staff to give extra support across operational management roles. This allowed it to maintain its own operations, as well as to lend the right level of support to its joint work with the LRF to manage and co-ordinate the county-wide response.

69. The service gave enough consideration to making sure its re-engaged staff were operationally competent for the work they were asked to do.

Governance of the service's response

70. 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.

71. The chair of Lincolnshire Fire and Rescue Authority was 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. He and the service maintained a constructive relationship.

72. 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. The authority's chair also passed the briefings to the chair of the county council's overview and scrutiny function so that this committee remained informed and could exercise appropriate oversight.

Looking to the future

73. 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.

74. Lincolnshire Fire and Rescue Service has played an effective role in the county-wide response. It has been able to build on well-established, constructive relationships with LRF partner organisations. The service as a whole has felt the benefits of a newly introduced, modern IT infrastructure. Senior staff have received positive feedback about the use of virtual meetings in maintaining communication and enabling effective working. 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 also planning to continue with more online firefighter training, to make it easier for its on-call staff to maintain their skills and competencies.

75. 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. It was particularly involved with the group that deals with business continuity planning.

Next steps

76. This letter will be published on our website. We propose starting 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 within a rectangular box with a light gray background.

Zoë Billingham

Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary