

Stuart Ruff
Chief Fire Officer
Norfolk Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor Margaret Dewsbury
Chair
Norfolk Fire and Rescue Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Ruff and Cllr Dewsbury,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: NORFOLK 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 which 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 19 and 30 October 2020. This letter summarises our findings.
5. In relation to your service, Norfolk Resilience Forum (NRF) declared a major incident on 19 March 2020.
6. In summary, we were impressed with how the service adapted and responded to the pandemic effectively and how it put the health and wellbeing of its people at the forefront of decision making.

7. The service provided support to Norfolk County Council and the NRF, including advice, resources, and effective command and control frameworks to co-ordinate its response. It maintained its statutory functions of prevention, protection and response while providing additional support to the community during the first phase of the pandemic, especially to its health partners. Wholtime firefighters and support staff delivered essential items and food packages to vulnerable people, on-call firefighters drove ambulances, and the service's unpaid community volunteers assisted the council with completing risk assessments and planning the mortuary facility. Resources were well managed, and the service's financial position was largely unaffected. Reserves didn't have to be used to cover extra costs. The service responded quickly and acted to build resilience in its control room and fire stations.

8. The service communicated well with its staff throughout the pandemic, including on issues relating to staff wellbeing. A notable achievement is the extra wellbeing support for its workforce who are at higher risk of COVID-19, including its black, Asian and minority ethnic staff. It also made sure staff had the resources they needed to work effectively. This includes additional technology and information as part of new flexible working arrangements.

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, the 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 it has processes in place to work and negotiate effectively with all appropriate staff associations about subjects relevant to their members.

(c) It should evaluate how effective its extra activities have been. It should then consider how its extra activities can give local communities the most benefit in future.

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. It produced and implemented a COVID-specific 'concept of operations' which guided its organisation response. This involved creating bespoke groups including those for: people, communities, logistics, communication and innovation. The innovation cell provided the framework to oversee and support additional work, including that provided under the tripartite agreement (see paragraph 42 below) and any other requests for work that the service might not

normally be involved in. It served as a 'catch-all' for new ways of working in unprecedented situations.

Fulfilling statutory functions

13. 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.

14. 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 has attended emergencies. It has also continued to provide prevention and protection activities using a risk-based approach in line with NFCC guidance, including face-to-face visits for the most vulnerable people who are at the greatest risk of fire in the community, and premises at highest risk of fire.

Response

15. 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.

16. The overall availability of crewed fire engines was better during the pandemic than it was during the same period last year. Between 1 April and 30 June 2020, the service's average fire engine availability was 92.2 percent compared with 83.4 percent during the same period in 2019. The service told us this was as a result of reallocating staff – including on-call firefighter support officers – to fill crewing gaps across the service to make sure engines were available. In addition, more on-call firefighters became available due to furlough or redundancy from primary employment.

17. The service introduced a different crewing model during this period, reducing the size of a crew on a fire engine to a maximum of five. This was a temporary measure to reduce the risk of infection.

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 was for several reasons including better fire engine availability and less road traffic. 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.

19. The service had good arrangements in place to make sure that its control room had enough staff during the pandemic. This included effective resilience arrangements, for example making the control room COVID-secure, retraining former control staff who work in other areas of the service, and fall-back arrangements as part of the East Coast and Hertfordshire Control Room Consortium.

Prevention

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

21. The service conducted fewer home fire risk checks and safe and well visits than it normally would. It introduced a new way of assessing the risks for vulnerable people in the community, and continued to target individuals it had identified as being at an increased risk from fire, including those at increased risk as a result of the pandemic.

22. It decided to continue offering face-to-face safe and well visits on a risk-assessed basis, and provided staff with suitable personal protective equipment (PPE) to do so.

Protection

23. 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. The service adopted this guidance.

24. The service didn't amend how it defines premises as high-risk during the pandemic. Risk is determined by many factors, and so services should keep this under review. But it did review premises risk assessments, recognising the risk to the public from fire can increase as businesses and other premises change their working environments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

25. The service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it would normally undertake. It continued face-to-face fire safety activities on a risk-assessed basis and provided staff with suitable PPE to do so.

26. The service continued to respond to complaints and to issue alteration notices, 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, completing COVID-19 risk assessments, carrying out 'desktop' assessments, and reducing the number of staff on visits.

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, 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 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.

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, peer support, manager outreach teams and access to external resources such as critical incident support for COVID-19.

31. Staff most at risk of 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 made available Norfolk County Council's 'COVID-19 Individual Consideration Assessment' which takes into account occupation, comorbidities, obesity and vulnerability to serious illness. For those assessed as high or very high risk, the necessary safeguards were then put in place, such as modified duties including remote or home working.

32. 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.

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

34. 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

35. Absences have increased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of days lost due to sickness absence increased by 19.1 percent between 1 April and 30 June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019.

36. The service updated the way it deals with staff absences to help it better manage staff wellbeing and health and safety, and make more effective decisions on how to allocate work. Guidance was provided for managers on recording absences, self-isolation, testing, and bereavement. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

Staff engagement

37. 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 one-to-ones with managers, virtual team meetings and weekly welfare checks via telephone or video call about wellbeing and health and safety.

38. Most on-call firefighter survey respondents told us that they received more communication than usual during the pandemic. The service made use of the same tools it used to keep in touch with all staff (see above) when communicating with on-call staff during the pandemic.

39. The service intends to maintain changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19 to promote smarter and flexible working, by embracing technology where possible and to support remote or home working.

Working with others, and making changes locally

40. To protect communities, fire and rescue service staff, including firefighters, 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 support to its communities.

41. The service carried out the following new activities: ambulance driving; training non-service personnel to drive ambulances; delivering essential items to vulnerable people; fitting face masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff working with COVID-19 patients; delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities; packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people; prevention and control training for care homes, including hand hygiene; creating PPE guidance and procedure videos; protecting vehicles in dangerous positions; supporting pedestrian safety on highways; and gaining entry to private property to provide access for the ambulance service.

42. 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 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.

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

44. Other unions were engaged, including UNISON, if their members were asked to do extra work, including work under the tripartite agreement.

45. Some 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.

46. There were extra requests for work by partner agencies. The service attempted to get these additional requests agreed as part of the tripartite agreement but experienced delays in obtaining agreement from the regional and national FBU. The service engaged with all unions during the pandemic, but on occasions took the decision to carry out additional activities without an agreement. Activities included: recovering and protecting vehicles in dangerous positions; supporting pedestrian safety on highways; and gaining entry to private properties to provide access for the ambulance service.

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

48. All activities to support other organisations during this period were monitored and reviewed. The service has identified which to continue under a memorandum of understanding: protecting vehicles in dangerous positions; supporting pedestrian safety on highways; and gaining entry to private property to provide access for the ambulance service.

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 local resilience forum – in this case, the NRF.

50. The service was an active member of the NRF during the pandemic. The service told us that the NRF's arrangements enabled the service to fully engage in the multi-agency response.

51. The service's chief fire officer is the chair of the NRF. As part of the NRF's response to COVID-19, the service was a member of the strategic co-ordinating group, tactical co-ordinating group, multi-agency fusion group, PPE distribution group, and communities and vulnerable group. The service was able to allocate 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. The service has made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. Between 1 March and 30 June 2020, its main extra costs were £103,000 for staff supporting the NRF, £60,500 for PPE and £20,000 for cleaning and decontamination supplies. The service seeks to recoup from the local ambulance trust the costs it incurred driving ambulances (£211,000). Where possible, it has exploited opportunities to make savings and used them to mitigate the financial risks it has identified. It fully understands the effect this will have on its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings.

54. Norfolk County Council secured extra government funding to support its response. The service did not need access to this or to its reserves to meet the extra costs that arose during this period.

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

Ways of working

56. The service changed how it operates during the pandemic. For example, it has introduced smarter, flexible working arrangements and virtual communication platforms. Where required, Norfolk County Council provided personal financial packages to support staff working from home.

57. 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.

58. The senior leaders 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.

59. 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

60. The service had enough resources available to respond to the level of demand during the COVID-19 pandemic and to re-allocate resources where necessary to support the work of its partner organisations.

61. 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.

62. As well as performing their statutory functions, wholetime and on-call firefighters undertook extra activities, including those under the tripartite agreement. Wholetime staff mainly provided support to the vulnerable, including welfare visits and delivery of food and essential items, while on-call firefighters mainly drove ambulances for the East of England Ambulance Service. This approach was taken because the service felt this was the best way to ensure it had the resources it needed to meet its foreseeable risk and provide extra support to its community.

63. As part of its workforce planning, the service considered re-engaging retired members of staff to provide resilience across non-operational roles, but concluded this was not needed.

64. The service used its unpaid community volunteers to support Norfolk County Council and NRF with planning a mortuary facility, helping with the multi-agency cell, producing COVID-19 risk assessments for premises, and command and control support for the coronavirus outbreak at Banham Poultry.

Governance of the service's response

65. 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.

66. The fire and rescue authority chair and the service maintained a constructive relationship. The 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.

67. The service regularly updated the fire and rescue authority 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.

68. The fire and rescue authority put arrangements in place to give its members relevant and regular information about how the service responded to the pandemic. It made use of technology and held meetings virtually.

69. 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

70. 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.

71. The service is reviewing lessons learned to inform ways of working for the future. Good practice and lessons learned were gained through several routes. These include the 'concept of operations' and seconding its staff to drive ambulances. They also include regular information exchanges via the NFCC and regular regional meetings. The service has improved its relationships with the police, ambulance and health partners, and is looking to build on its collaborations in the region. It is using virtual communication platforms to improve prevention and protection safety messaging, such as adapting both its Crucial Crew Youth programme (a multi-agency project that teaches safety skills to primary school children) and staff training so that they are conducted online. The service has transformed its use of technology and is considering how virtual platforms and remote working can help it become more effective and efficient.

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". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large 'Z' and 'B'.

Zoë Billingham

Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary