

HMI Matt Parr CB

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

Andrew Brodie
Chief Fire Officer
North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service

Julia Mulligan
North Yorkshire Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Brodie and Commissioner Mulligan,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: NORTH YORKSHIRE 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 9 and 20 November 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

5. In relation to your service, North Yorkshire County Council and North Yorkshire Police declared a major incident on 4 March 2020.

6. In summary, the service adapted and responded to the pandemic effectively. It used its on-call and wholetime firefighters to respond to emergencies. It involved all staff groups in providing additional activities to the communities of North Yorkshire during the first phase of the pandemic. Firefighters were trained and on standby to drive ambulances, and gave fire safety

advice and fire cover to support to the establishment of a Nightingale hospital. Staff also delivered essential items to vulnerable members of the community, as well as personal protective equipment (PPE) and other medical supplies to NHS/care facilities.

7. A notable achievement is the support the service gave to the county council's shielding programme. The service made approximately 6,000 telephone calls to the county's known vulnerable people, to find out their needs and check how they were. The service also offered fire safety advice during these calls.

8. Staff are empowered to be creative and innovative, and have provided local solutions to support communities. For example, staff made use of station video conferencing technology to talk to and work with fire cadets.

9. The service carried out a live national webcast event to tell businesses and communities how to reduce their risk of fire and other emergencies, and increase their resilience to COVID-19. It also participated in a fortnightly public update live stream. The North Yorkshire police, fire and crime commissioner (PFCC) led this update, giving advice and informing the public what was being done in response to COVID-19.

10. 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, North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue 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's) guidance on protection.

(c) It should work with all staff to determine how it can identify and address any current and longer-term impacts COVID-19 may have on their wellbeing.

Preparing for the pandemic

11. In line with good governance, the service had a health emergency plan for dealing with an event such as pandemic flu which was last reviewed in February 2020. It also had 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.

12. The service has reviewed its health emergency plan to reflect the changing situation and what it has learned during the pandemic so far. The service also recognises that its business continuity plan needs refreshing; at the time of our inspection, it was carrying out a review. Currently, the service is inserting addendums alongside existing policies. It is doing this to deal with changes in advance of the review being completed.

13. The plans don't include enough detail on degradation arrangements for prevention, protection and support functions, social distancing, making premises COVID- secure, remote working, mutual aid, and supply of PPE. However, the service discusses and manages all requirements through its business continuity management team. The service has revised its degradation model to take into account the national, regional and local forecasts of predicted staff absences.

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 provide its core statutory functions throughout the pandemic in line with advice from the NFCC. This means the service has continued to respond to calls from the public and attended emergencies. It has also continued to carry out prevention and protection work, doing some of this remotely to reduce the risk of staff contracting the virus. It has continued to give staff risk-critical training.

Response

16. 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.

17. The overall availability of fire engines was better during the pandemic than it was during the same period the previous year. Between 1 April and 30 June 2020, the service's average overall fire engine availability was 94.8 percent compared with 87.3 percent during the same period in 2019. We were told that this was due to the service having more wholetime firefighters, who had recently been recruited. Also, the service used staffing reserves and overtime to cover any absences in crewing. And the service had more on- call firefighters available as they were either furloughed from their primary employment or working from home.

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

19. The service couldn't provide us data as to whether its average response time to fires changed during the start of the pandemic compared with the same period in 2019. [Official data has recently been published by the Home Office](#) on response times during the period covered by this inspection.

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

21. This included effective resilience arrangements, including re-engaging two staff on a temporary basis and retraining six staff who were employed elsewhere in the service and who had worked previously in control. When they were taking calls, the service 'buddied' these additional staff with existing control room operators.

22. The service also contacted former operational staff to create a pool of people to bolster crewing numbers if needed. Currently, the service has a pool of 40, although none has yet been needed.

Prevention

23. 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 and found it useful in confirming what it already had in place.

24. The service conducted fewer safe and well visits 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.

25. The service decided to continue offering face-to-face safe and well visits because it could give staff suitable PPE. In addition, the service developed a risk assessment so that staff could assess and adapt their approach to allow activities to continue either remotely or face to face.

26. The service introduced the option of a safe and well visit by telephone instead of face-to-face safe and well visits. It also introduced other options including offering fire safety advice as part of the shielding calls programme. It distributed fire safety leaflets through pharmacies and charity shops, and with food parcels.

Protection

27. 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 broadly adopted this guidance.

28. The service didn't review how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic. It did temporarily change its protection strategy as a result of the pandemic. It changed from the traditional regulatory and enforcement model to a business support model, offering advice and guidance. It plans to revert to its previous approach, while taking into account any learning from the pandemic.

29. Over the period we reviewed, the service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it would normally undertake. As a result of the variation to its protection strategy, the service suspended its risk-based inspection programme. It carried out fire safety audits following incidents, complaints, and business engagement. Overall, this level of protection activity is less than what we would expect, and is not in line with national guidance.

30. The service continued to issue alteration notices, enforcement notices and prohibition notices. It did continue to respond to statutory building control consultations.

31. The service continued face-to-face fire safety audits and enforcement activity because it could give staff suitable PPE. It has also completed activities using remote contact (for example, via telephone and written correspondence). It didn't introduce risk-based desktop appraisals as an alternative to face-to-face audits to minimise face-to-face contact between members of staff and the public. However, this has created a backlog which the service now needs to address. It is considering introducing desktop audits in the future.

32. It introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as a triage process for dealing with complaints. It also promoted fire safety messages through its website and social media, as well as local radio. And the PFCC's joint police and fire public update meetings have provided the public and businesses with regular updates.

33. A Nightingale hospital was established in the service's area at Harrogate. The service worked with the hospital's responsible person to put in place suitable and reasonable fire safety measures. The service also reallocated some of its operational resources to make sure it had adequate response arrangements in place to support the hospital.

Staff health and safety and wellbeing

34. The service gave some consideration to the wellbeing needs of staff. But more could have been done to talk to staff about their needs so that the right support could be put in place.

35. Most staff survey respondents told us that they could access services to support their mental wellbeing if needed. Support available to staff included occupational health, including psychological support; counselling; access to an exercise physiologist; and an employee assistance programme. Mental health support was also available through an external provider and a psychotherapist. Also, several staff are trained mental health first aiders and can offer guidance and support. During the pandemic, the service ran a social media campaign to support staff in getting active.

36. Staff most at risk from COVID-19 were identified by managers and/or shielding information. The service developed and implemented processes working with staff to manage the risk. It carried out risk assessments, which involved occupational health services and medical advisers liaising with individuals to understand what support they needed. Provisions are based on individual need. The service hasn't put anything specific in place for black, Asian and minority ethnic staff. Feedback indicates that managers could have done more to discuss health and wellbeing and give support to those with caring responsibilities.

37. Wellbeing best practice was shared with other services. The service doesn't yet intend to discuss with its staff how it should plan for the potential longer-term effects of COVID-19 on its workforce.

38. The service made sure that firefighters were competent to do their work during the pandemic. It reviewed its approach to training to make sure it could offer this in a safe way.

Initially, the service suspended firefighter fitness testing. This was in line with NFCC guidance, while the service put appropriate safety measures in place.

39. The service assessed the risks of new work to make sure its staff had the skills and equipment needed to work safely and effectively. It was largely able to provide its workforce with suitable PPE, mostly on time. It participated in the national fire sector scheme to procure PPE, which allowed it to achieve value for money

Staff absence

40. 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 30.2 percent compared with the same period in 2019.

41. The service hasn't updated its absence policy to reflect any changes due to the pandemic. This is because of the organisational restructure that is taking place. In March 2020, the service published an amendment to the policy. This included information for staff about the reporting of COVID-19 absences, including self-isolation; pay conditions during COVID-19 absences; return to work following an absence or self-isolation; and testing requirements for COVID-19. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

Staff engagement

42. 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 and communications via newsletters, email, messaging services and virtual meeting platforms. Representative bodies are also involved in preparing staff communications.

43. The service made use of telephone, email, messaging services, virtual meeting platforms and daily bulletins when communicating with on-call staff during COVID-19. Because of changes to the service's ways of working in response to COVID-19, it intends to maintain the use of virtual team meetings and communications. It has installed equipment on all stations to enable this to be part of its usual processes.

Working with others, and making changes locally

44. 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.

45. The service carried out the following new activities: being trained to drive ambulances; assembling facemasks; delivering PPE; and packing/repacking food for (and delivering essential items to) vulnerable people. Staff were trained and on standby to transport patients to and from the Nightingale hospital if needed.

46. 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 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.

47. The service consulted locally with the FBU and the Fire Officers' Association to implement the tripartite agreement. Other unions were engaged, including UNISON, if their members were asked to do extra work, including work under the tripartite agreement. 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.

48. There were extra requests for work by partner agencies that fell outside the tripartite agreement, including work to support the county council's shielding programme. Staff made approximately 6,000 telephone calls to get in touch with people, find out their needs and check how they were. Staff visited addresses when remote contact wasn't successful. The service also supported food banks by delivering food parcels.

49. The service recognises that the national tripartite agreement was needed to provide a mechanism for all fire and rescue services to undertake additional activities. However, it feels that more could have been achieved locally alongside this. Initially, for example, volunteer members of the public supported food banks until the service could reach an agreement with the local FBU to do this.

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

51. The service hasn't yet fully reviewed and evaluated its activities to support other organisations during this period. That said, it has recognised the importance of using data; currently, it is working with the county council's data analytics office to further develop the use of data in supporting preventative activities. It also recognises that the tripartite agreement has offered new opportunities for prevention work. The service and associated representative bodies feel that they have worked well together.

Local resilience forum

52. 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 (LRF). North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service is a member of the North Yorkshire LRF and was actively involved during the pandemic. The service told us that the LRF's arrangements enabled the service to fully engage in the multi-agency response.

53. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the service participated in the PPE panel, the strategic and recovery co-ordination groups, and the multi-agency co-ordinating group. It also acted as vice-chair of the tactical co-ordination group. The service was able to allocate suitably qualified staff to participate in these groups without affecting its core duties. It seconded two members of staff to be part of COVID-19 working groups. This meant that it could co-ordinate workstreams.

Use of resources

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

55. The service has made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. At the time of our inspection, its main extra costs were £198,000 spent on additional staffing costs; and £200,000 spent on PPE, cleaning, cleaning supplies, ICT infrastructure and fire safety communication materials.

56. 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. The service is monitoring savings made due to the pandemic. These savings relate to staff working from home, and conference and travel fees.

57. The service received £723,000 of extra government funding to support its response. It has shown how it used what it has spent of this income efficiently, and that it mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period. It is setting aside some of the remaining extra funding to address the potential future impacts on council tax funding reductions.

58. 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.

Ways of working

59. The service changed the way in which it operates during the pandemic. For example, it used technology to give fire safety guidance to communities and businesses, and to communicate with its staff and give training. It had the necessary IT to support remote working. Where new IT was needed, it made sure that procurement processes achieved good value for money.

60. The service could quickly implement changes to how it operates. This allowed its staff to work flexibly and efficiently during the pandemic. The service introduced station 'bubbles' to minimise contact and the risk of contamination. It adapted drill sessions for on-call staff so that minimum personnel were involved, while increasing the number of sessions to maintain competency. The service feels that it is well placed because of the investment it made in technology for home working before the pandemic.

61. Before the pandemic, the service put in place a small number of temporary wholetime contracts for on-call staff. It did this to cover recruitment gaps until April 2020. As a result of

additional work during the pandemic, some of these contracts have been extended to the end of 2020 to meet the additional support needed for the Nightingale hospital and some of the tripartite work (such as ambulance driving).

62. The service has had some positive feedback from staff on how they were engaged with during the pandemic. As a result, the service has invested in video equipment for all stations. And it has already invested in virtual platforms to help promote a sustainable change to its working culture.

63. 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

64. 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. Although there are mechanisms in place to monitor staff performance across the service, staff feedback indicates that performance conversations could take place more often.

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

66. The on-call workforce took on extra responsibilities covering some of the roles agreed as part of the tripartite agreement, other activities and/or the shifts of absent wholetime staff, and/or other extra responsibilities. Other staff groups also took on extra responsibilities, covering some of the roles agreed as part of the tripartite agreement and/or other activities.

67. As part of its workforce planning, where appropriate, extra capacity was identified and reassigned to support other areas of the service and other organisations. The service re-engaged some members of staff to provide resilience in fire control roles. The service gave enough consideration to making sure re-engaged staff were operationally competent for the work they were asked to do.

Governance of the service's response

68. 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. In North Yorkshire, the PFCC is the fire and rescue authority. Each authority ultimately has the same function: to set the service's priorities and budget and make sure that the budget is spent wisely.

69. The PFCC 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. The service regularly

updated the PFCC 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.

70. During the pandemic, the PFCC 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. The PFCC's chief executive and monitoring officer, section 151 officer, and policy and scrutiny officer (fire and rescue) are part of the fire and rescue service leadership team, and so have been involved in the decisions made.

Looking to the future

71. 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.

72. North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service has improved its collaboration with other agencies. It is looking at ways in which its workforce can support these organisations more. The service's on-call review is underway, as it started before the pandemic. This review will build on the lessons learned during the pandemic, so the service can understand how it can broaden responsibilities.

73. The pandemic has also reinforced the importance of data. The service is now working with partners to understand how it can use data better to inform its risk profile. The service will also consider any lessons learned in its new integrated risk management plan and associated public consultation.

74. 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. It will look to continue with a more blended way of providing services.

75. Good practice and what worked was shared with other services, the NFCC and regional forums. This includes information relating to workplace adjustments that the service has made to support the needs of a high-risk member of staff. The service has also carried out an exercise (named 'Bianco') during the pandemic; this simulated the potential significant and deteriorating impacts on an employee of a positive COVID-19 test. The service shared findings from the exercise with the NFCC, the Home Office and all other fire and rescue services. The service has also shared a model that it has developed to determine how it will use resources based on the level of risk of COVID-19.

Next steps

76. 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 'MP' followed by a stylized flourish and a long horizontal stroke.

Matt Parr CB

Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

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