

John Buckley
Chief Fire Officer
Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor Michael Payne
Chair
Nottinghamshire and City of Nottingham Fire and Rescue Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Buckley and Cllr Payne,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: NOTTINGHAMSHIRE 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 23 October 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

5. In relation to your service, local NHS representatives declared the pandemic a major incident on 1 March 2020.

6. In summary, the service adapted and responded to the pandemic effectively and has had no difficulty meeting its statutory duties. Business continuity planning and management is one of its strengths, and it is working towards Business Continuity Institute accreditation. We found examples

of how anticipation of, and forward planning for, the pandemic have held the service in good stead. For example, it issued tablets with access to all of the service's business applications before the pandemic, which helped it transition rapidly to home working.

7. The service has provided additional support to the community during the first phase of the pandemic. It helped to establish a temporary mortuary, it has delivered food and medication to the vulnerable, and its firefighters have been trained to recover dead bodies if existing services are overrun. On behalf of local councils, the service has initiated a 'befriending and signposting' scheme. This connects residents who have been cut off from their community because of the pandemic to council services. The service has also provided important support to the local ambulance trust. Before the national tripartite agreement had been reached, the chief fire officer secured the co-operation of firefighters to assist paramedics. This has helped with the emergency transfer of non-COVID-19 patients to outpatient appointments or to receive urgent care.

8. 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, Nottinghamshire 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 update its plans, including business continuity plans, using the lessons it has learned from the pandemic to date.

Preparing for the pandemic

9. Prior to COVID-19, the service had not developed a specific plan to manage a pandemic. Its response has been dependent on its business continuity plans, which were activated on 6 March 2020. They help guide operational procedures, welfare arrangements and the assessment of risks within the workplace. In terms of joint working, the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Local Resilience Forum (LRF) has a flu pandemic plan which facilitates a collaborative response to the crisis.

10. The plans were 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. The service has reviewed its plans to reflect the changing situation and what it has learned during the pandemic.

11. In particular, the service has adapted well in order to provide additional humanitarian support to Nottinghamshire's communities. This has brought relief to other public sector services that have been under pressure. For example, it has packaged food for the vulnerable, assisted with the delivery of personal protective equipment (PPE), and staff were trained to fit face masks for the NHS and social care workers. The 'lessons learned log', which forms part of the 'COVID Library' on the service's intranet, is an effective way of making new guidance available to the workforce.

The service's business continuity arrangements have also been recently reviewed by an external consultant.

Fulfilling statutory functions

12. 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.

13. The service has continued to provide these functions throughout the pandemic in line with advice from the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC). This means the service continues to respond to calls from the public and attend emergencies in a way that it is COVID-safe.

Response

14. 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.

15. Over the same time period, the overall availability of fire engines was better than it was during the same period in the previous year. Between 1 April and 30 June 2020, the service's average overall fire engine availability was 97.7 percent compared with 86.6 percent during the same period in 2019. This was for two reasons. Twelve on-call firefighters were recruited as wholetime firefighters on a permanent basis to boost operational resilience. And on-call firefighters were generally more available during this period to cover unforeseen absences as they were furloughed from their primary employment.

16. The service didn't change its crewing models or shift patterns during this period. However, there were occasions when the number of firefighters in crews was reduced. This was managed on a case-by-case basis.

17. The service told us that its average response time to fires improved during the pandemic compared with the same period in 2019. This was due to an increased availability of fire crews. 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.

18. The service had good arrangements in place to make sure that it had enough call handlers to receive 999 calls and dispatch fire crews to incidents. The service shares a joint fire control room with Derbyshire and Leicestershire fire and rescue services as part of a tri-service arrangement. Back-up arrangements are resilient and control room staff can answer calls and dispatch crews in all three counties. Shared facilities like this make the operational response to emergencies more resilient. The risk of infection was reduced by limiting access to the control room and regularly sanitising surfaces.

Prevention

19. 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. It has also reviewed which individuals and groups it considered to be at an increased risk of harm as a consequence of the pandemic.

20. Its prevention programme has been adapted accordingly. Routine personal visits to residents were suspended and initial assessments are now made on the telephone. Priority individuals assessed to be 'at risk' continue to be supported in their homes by specialist prevention staff wearing appropriate PPE.

21. The service has changed its procedures for residents deemed to be in lower risk categories. When it judges that there is a no risk of immediate harm, advice and support is provided on the telephone. Those deemed to be at medium risk of harm are also given immediate advice as part of the initial assessment. Thereafter, they are scheduled for a future visit when local restrictions permit. The only exception to this is when residents do not have a smoke detection device fitted, in which case they will have a priority personal visit.

22. Overall, the service conducted fewer safe and well visits than it would normally undertake. Inevitably, backlogs have built up in the system as a consequence. The service has made good use of COVID-19 grant funding to employ four members of staff to boost prevention capability. They were recruited on one-year contracts, and their role is to reduce the backlog.

23. We also recognise that the service has stepped forward to connect vulnerable residents to local authority-run COVID support lines. The befriending and signposting scheme, which came out of the LRF's work, reaches out to those who are most likely to suffer because of COVID-19. Firefighters and staff put them in touch with Council support hubs if they have any needs. It is also an opportunity to offer fire safety advice when relevant. The service has supported 850 people in this way.

Protection

24. 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. The service adopted this guidance.

25. The service has developed a new methodology for its protection programme, which is currently the subject of a consultation process. As such, it has decided not to change which premises it defines as high risk because of the pandemic. However, it has adapted how it completes audits, in line with NFCC guidance.

26. For high-risk premises, it has continued with face-to-face fire safety audit and enforcement activity. This is done in accordance with COVID-19 safety measures including distancing, PPE protection, and premises being able to show that they are COVID secure. Exceptions have been

made where the infection risk of audit activity has been assessed as being too high – notably, no visits have been made to residential care homes.

27. We also note the progress made auditing high-rise premises during the pandemic. The city centre has a lot of multi-occupancy buildings, including council-owned student accommodation. The service has accelerated its inspection programme as part of collaborative work with the council. This is led by the joint audit inspection team (JAIT). The service seconded additional fire safety officers to the JAIT to complete more audits when buildings were empty during university vacations.

28. For lower risk premises, the service introduced desktop appraisals as an alternative to physical inspection. Alongside this, the service is using digital channels like web pages, social media and webinars to raise awareness and provide fire protection advice. It has maintained its enforcement activity and has continued to respond to building control consultations in a timely manner.

29. We note that the service has completed fewer fire safety audits than usual as a result of COVID-19, and backlogs have built up. However, these have now been rescheduled.

30. There is one building in Nottinghamshire with cladding similar to that at Grenfell Tower. The service continues to engage with the responsible person for fire safety at the building as part of a national remediation programme.

31. A site for a Nightingale hospital has been identified in Nottinghamshire. Although the final decision has not yet been made on whether it will be built, the service has worked with the NHS and contractors to advise on fire safety measures.

Staff health and safety and wellbeing

32. Staff wellbeing has been 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.

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, mental health webinars, a peer support network, counselling and one-to-one meetings with line managers.

34. The service is part of the Blue Light Programme and Your Mind Matters. These are programmes run by charities that offer support to public sector workers. The service has also developed a programme of pilates, zumba and mindfulness to support mental and physical wellbeing. These are accessible to all staff.

35. Staff most at risk from COVID-19 have been identified effectively. In line with NFCC best practice, the service developed a 'COVID risk estimator' for all members of staff. They were invited to enter their personal data (age, general health condition, ethnicity, gender, etc) on a

screening matrix. The risk 'score' was cross-referenced to the individual's role and the risk it carries of contracting COVID-19.

36. The COVID risk estimator has proved to be an effective means of establishing not only someone's likelihood of contracting COVID-19, but also the likely consequences of the infection for the individual. High-scoring members of staff have access to a tailored support programme. The risk estimator is helping the service to make informed decisions about which staff should return to the workplace and when. It was promoted by senior leaders to staff who were most vulnerable, including those from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background. This has led to the risk estimator being widely used. There was also a good level of engagement with the COVID-19 support programme for high-risk scorers and anyone else who had concerns.

37. The service made sure that firefighters were competent to do their work during the pandemic. It has adapted its training curriculum to reduce the risk of infection. This includes ensuring that theory-based training is completed away from the workplace, and that smaller groups of firefighters take part in practical training.

38. The service has assessed the risks of all new tasks and responsibilities undertaken as a consequence of COVID-19. This is led by the service's business continuity management group (BCMG). The involvement of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) in the BCMG has worked well for the service. The union's representative sees at first hand how the detailed risk assessments are completed for new tasks. This helps reassure staff that their interests and safety are being taken seriously and is an effective means of ensuring the support of the workforce in a fast-moving period of change.

39. The service provided its workforce with suitable PPE on time and ensured that it achieved value for money. Before the pandemic, the service issued reusable aerosol/particle-resistant respirators to bring more resilience in a time of crisis. The service has also drawn on regional procurement frameworks, which have proved reliable. The service will also make use of the national PPE supply hub led by Kent Fire and Rescue Service, should the need arise.

Staff absence

40. Absences have decreased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of days or shifts lost due to sickness absence between 1 April and 30 June 2020 decreased by 46.9 percent compared with the same period in 2019.

41. The service updated its absence policy so that it could better manage staff wellbeing and health and safety. This includes 'return to work' procedures after self-isolation, testing requirements, and pay for staff who are absent for COVID-related reasons. The service has also established an 'attendance team' to act as a single point of contact for firefighters and staff. The team advises and supports anyone who is worried or uncertain about what to do. This has helped staff who have family members who need to shield or self-isolate, or who experience symptoms of the virus.

42. Data is routinely collected on the numbers of staff who are either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

Staff engagement

43. Most staff survey respondents told us that the service has provided regular and relevant communication to all staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. The service developed a range of communication channels at the start of lockdown. The chief fire officer uses Skype to engage with staff on a weekly basis. 'Vlogs' are increasingly being used for operational updates, and the service publishes a service bulletin three times a week.

44. Several changes have been made to how the service operates, as a consequence of the pandemic. The service is evaluating some of these changes with a view to them becoming 'business as usual' in the future. These include continuing with virtual meetings, more online learning and support for flexible working.

Working with others, and making changes locally

45. 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.

46. The service carried out the following new activities: delivering essential services and packing food supplies for vulnerable people; delivering PPE to NHS and social care facilities; introducing the befriending and signposting scheme; and supporting East Midlands Ambulance Service NHS Trust (East Midlands Ambulance Service) with the transport of non-COVID patients. Working with other organisations, the service delivered over 10,000 items of food and medication to vulnerable people. The service has also trained staff to provide further support to other organisations, should the crisis worsen. Firefighters have been trained to transfer bodies to mortuaries, and other staff have been instructed to help NHS and social care workers fit face masks, if necessary.

47. 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.

48. The service consulted locally with the FBU and the Fire Officers' Association to implement the tripartite agreement.

49. 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. A 'partner assistance cell' has been established to help the LRF manage requests for assistance from other organisations. This is led by a senior 'decision maker' and provides a single point of contact in the service to receive and allocate tasks. This ensures that requests from other organisations are promptly attended to and rigorously risk-assessed, and that additional services are subject to proper cost controls.

50. The service also agreed to support partner organisations with other tasks that fell outside the agreement. These included establishing a temporary mortuary in Mansfield, working with paramedics to transport patients, delivering food parcels to the vulnerable, and running the befriending and signposting scheme that supports local councils.

51. In the early days of the pandemic, there were some delays in agreeing operational protocols for joint working with the East Midlands Ambulance Service. The service was asked to drive ambulances crewed by paramedics to help non-COVID patients get to outpatient appointments or receive urgent care. As this additional work had not yet been approved as part of the tripartite agreement, the chief fire officer made a personal appeal to the workforce to "do what was right for the communities of Nottinghamshire". A number of volunteers stepped forward to drive ambulances and the problem was quickly resolved.

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 LRF. Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service is a member of the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire LRF.

53. The service has been an active member of the LRF during the pandemic. Two experienced senior members of staff were allocated to represent the service at the LRF's strategic and tactical co-ordination groups. Their presence has brought a cohesion and a consistency of approach, which is held in high regard by other members. It also means the service is at the centre of the joint agency response to the pandemic.

54. The service is a member of a number of operational 'cells' that support the resilience forum's overall strategy to manage COVID-19 – for example, the 'communication cell' for joint public messaging, and the 'excess death cell' which ensures that the city and county's mortuaries are not overrun.

Use of resources

55. The service's financial position hasn't been significantly affected by COVID-19.

56. The service has made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. Up until 30 June 2020, its main extra costs were PPE supplies (£25,000), sanitising

products (£14,000), ICT infrastructure and licences (£30,000) and additional costs incurred by on-call firefighters providing services as part of the tripartite agreement. The service understands the effect this will have on its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings.

57. Where possible, the service has exploited opportunities to make savings during this period and used them to mitigate any financial risks it has identified. This includes surpluses that have accrued because of reduced travel and conferencing costs.

58. The service has received £1.05m of extra government funding to support its response. By 30 June 2020, it had spent this money on the additional costs incurred by on-call firefighters (£24,000), support to the LRF (£8,000) and overtime (£4,000). About a third of this grant has been held back in an 'earmarked' reserve for future costs related to the ongoing pandemic. It has shown how it used this income efficiently, and that it mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period.

59. The service hasn't had to use any of its general reserves to meet the extra costs of the pandemic.

60. When used, overtime was managed effectively and used sparingly.

Ways of working

61. The service is adapting the way it operates during the pandemic. Its robust business continuity arrangements meant that it was in a good state of readiness, and the mobile technology it rolled out before the pandemic has served it well. The service has also rapidly adapted to home working, as all of its business applications are widely available on tablets. The benefits of working from home became apparent when payroll staff had to self-isolate: in spite of these restrictions, monthly salary and other payments continued without interruption.

62. Because of the pandemic, the service brought forward its plans to introduce a new video conferencing platform. This has facilitated the chief fire officer's weekly communication to staff, and has allowed other internal communication, like staff bulletins, to be made interactive. These will become permanent features of how the service operates.

63. In other areas, the service has changed how it operates, out of necessity. For example, to maintain firefighters' operational competence, the service has become more reliant on e-learning. Only practical training exercises that involve close human contact are undertaken in groups. This is done on a watch-by-watch basis to minimise the risk of infection. Similar arrangements exist at on-call crewed fire stations: rather than the whole crew gathering once a week for training, sessions are staggered over a number of days and involve fewer people.

64. Similar adaptations have been made to promotion processes. The service has recently completed 'virtual' assessment processes for promotions to watch manager and station manager. Feedback from both candidates and assessors was positive, and the service is considering making

these changes permanent. Overall, the service is able to quickly implement changes to how it operates. This allows its staff to work flexibly and efficiently during the pandemic.

65. The service has worked closely with the NFCC to implement change during the pandemic. The chief fire officer represents East Midlands fire and rescue services at the NFCC 'COVID Gold' strategic meetings. His involvement has helped bring consistency to operational practices in the region. This has helped smooth the implementation of new procedures; for example, the wearing of face masks in fire appliances and frontline use of the NHS COVID app. The service has also benefited from NFCC workshops – for example, senior practitioners have attended best practice seminars relevant to COVID-related risk assessments.

66. The senior leaders have had positive feedback from staff on how they were engaged with during the pandemic. As a result, the service plans to adopt these changes into its usual procedures and to consider how they can be developed further to help promote a sustainable change to its working culture.

Staffing

67. The service has 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.

68. Arrangements put in place to monitor staff performance across the service are effective. This means the service can be sure its staff are making the best contribution that they reasonably can during this period. Extra capacity is identified and reassigned to support other areas of the service and other organisations.

69. Over the course of the pandemic, the main role for wholetime firefighters has been to provide the service's core responsibilities. We expect services to keep their processes under review to make sure they use their wholetime workforces as productively as possible. We recognise wholetime firefighters have also volunteered to crew ambulances and deliver medication, food parcels and PPE to the public and social care sector. Some firefighters have worked with other organisations to establish temporary mortuaries and others have been trained to recover bodies should the need arise.

70. Both wholetime and on-call firefighters have also been involved in the service's prevention programme, which has been adapted as a consequence of the pandemic. A large-scale commitment has been made to local authorities to create the befriending and signposting scheme. Firefighters are also responsible for the initial contact with vulnerable residents who had been scheduled for personal prevention visits. As COVID-19 limits face-to-face contact to a minimum, this is an important service. It identifies those at the greatest risk of harm in their homes, so that they can be seen by specialist officers.

Governance of the service's response

71. 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.

72. Nottinghamshire and City of Nottingham Fire and Rescue Authority has been 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.

73. Because of the pandemic, the chair of the fire and rescue authority has re-organised the authority's committee structures to support the service in a more agile way. He has established a group leaders' forum to support the service with urgent business and budgetary decision making. This has helped to fast track approval for the service to exceed spending projections and increase borrowing limits should this be necessary.

Looking to the future

74. During the pandemic, services were able to adapt quickly to new ways of working. This meant that they were able to 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.

75. Single login access to all of the service's business applications on tablets has led to transformational improvements during the course of the pandemic. As well as ensuring core business can continue without interruption, it has brought a greater reach that allows senior leaders to engage with the workforce more effectively. In a survey we completed in advance of the inspection, staff were positive about how they are communicated with and said they have choice of communication channels to keep themselves up to date.

76. The service is also increasingly using its technology for operational benefits. Recognising how 'information overload' in a fast-moving period of change was causing difficulty, a video was recorded to communicate the role of the 'partner assistance cell' in the LRF. Examples such as this are encouraging. While we recognise that time will be needed to review new ways of working, the service's modern technology has significant potential for transformational improvement.

Next steps

77. 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 some of our findings.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Zoë Billingham". The signature is written in black ink on a light-colored, textured background.

Zoë Billingham

Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary