

Trevor Ferguson  
Chief Fire Officer  
Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor Colin Dudley  
Chair  
Royal Berkshire Fire Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Ferguson and Councillor Dudley,

### **COVID-19 INSPECTION: ROYAL BERKSHIRE 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 because 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 12 and 23 October 2020. This letter summarises our findings.
5. In relation to your service, the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum (LRF) jointly declared a major incident on 19 March 2020.
6. In summary, the service adapted and responded to the pandemic effectively. The service was able to respond to emergency calls, engage with communities most at risk, and fulfil its prevention and protection duties. It provided additional support to the community during the first

phase of the pandemic. It used its wholetime firefighters to respond to emergencies, and the increased availability of its on-call workforce provided additional resource which it used in different ways. These included managing a logistics cell that distributed personal protective equipment (PPE) to frontline workers across the Thames Valley and meeting a request from Slough Borough Council to provide welfare visits to residents in its communities that were shielding. The service also provided emergency planning expertise to assure the coroner that effective death management processes were in place. This meant the people of Berkshire were better supported by the service throughout the pandemic than they would otherwise have been.

7. Resources were well managed and the service's financial position was largely unaffected, especially as reserves didn't have to be used to cover extra costs. The service was able to respond quickly to staff absences and implemented work to build resilience in its control room. The service communicated well with its staff throughout the pandemic, including on issues relating to staff wellbeing and mental health provision. It also provided guidance and support to its managers and staff to develop their understanding of the potential increased risk of domestic violence during the pandemic. It made sure all staff had the resources they needed to do their jobs effectively, including providing extra IT and putting in place new flexible working arrangements.

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

### **Preparing for the pandemic**

9. In line with good governance, the service had a pandemic flu plan (the Thames Valley LRF's plan) and business continuity plans, which were in date. These plans were activated. They 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 learnt during the pandemic.

10. The plans now include further detail on what elements of the service should maintain response capability if loss of staff is greater than normal. These are the degradation arrangements. They cover prevention, protection, response and support functions, social distancing, making premises 'COVID secure', remote working, mutual aid and the supply of PPE. Further guidance was provided to staff about COVID-19 testing, self-isolation, living with vulnerable people and dealing with bereavement.

## Fulfilling statutory functions

11. 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.

12. 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 attended emergencies. It has also continued to undertake prevention work, and has carried out home safety visits using a risk-based approach following NFCC guidance. Face-to-face visits by operational staff and community safety advisers were provided only for the most vulnerable people. Protection activity continued, with the service maintaining audits in line with NFCC guidance and COVID-19 alert levels. It continued with building consultations, enforcement activity and visits to high-rise buildings in line with its building risk review programme.

### *Response*

13. 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.

14. The overall availability of 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 overall fire engine availability was 84.6 percent compared with 78.6 percent during the same period in 2019. We were told that this was as a result of lower sickness levels and an increased number of on-call firefighters being available to respond to emergencies due to being furloughed from their primary employment.

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

16. The service told us that its average response time to fires improved during the pandemic compared with the same period last year. This was due to several reasons including lower sickness levels, better fire engine availability and less road traffic during this period. This may not be reflected in [official data recently published by the Home Office](#), because services don't all collect and calculate their data the same way.

17. The service had good arrangements in place to make sure that its control room had enough staff during the pandemic. These included effective resilience arrangements, such as daily reporting to management on staffing levels, restricting access to its control room, and implementing enhanced cleaning regimes for all staff. The service also collaborated with the other fire and rescue services in the Thames Valley region and ensured that the secondary control room in Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service also restricted access to control room staff only.

## *Prevention*

18. 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.

19. The service conducted fewer safe and well visits 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. As a result, it added those at risk of arson, hate crime, and domestic violence, and health and social care referrals from local authorities or other trusted partners. Accordingly, it responded to each high-risk referral from partners, including Thames Valley Police. It also instigated a triage system to identify risk levels by telephone with the resident. The service would then either undertake a face-to-face visit or provide safety advice over the phone, highlighting any needs to relevant partner agencies.

20. The service decided to continue offering face-to-face safe and well visits on a risk-assessed basis and was able to give staff suitable PPE equipment.

21. The service introduced the option of a safe and well visit by telephone instead of face to face. In response to an increased number of referrals relating to concerns about safeguarding or arson, the service provided guidance on safeguarding to all staff, and extended who it provides advice to. The service also responded to a request from Slough Borough Council, providing seven on-call staff to provide over 200 welfare checks to vulnerable residents.

## *Protection*

22. 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.

23. The service didn't review its definition of high-risk premises during the pandemic.

24. The service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it would normally undertake. It decided to continue face-to-face fire safety audits and enforcement work because it could give staff suitable PPE. It introduced risk-based desktop appraisals instead of face-to-face audits to minimise face-to-face contact between members of staff and the public.

25. The service continued to issue enforcement and prohibition notices. It brought a successful prosecution against a business owner following several serious fire safety breaches. One area of protection activity that was unaffected by the COVID-19 control measures was consultation work, which continued to be done remotely. During COVID-19, 204 consultations were completed.

26. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as using telephone and email to make the initial contact, using video conferencing and live streaming, and using electronic documents to replace hard-copy letters. It also used social media and its own website to inform the public about fire safety measures.

27. The service has continued to engage with those responsible for fire safety in high-risk premises with cladding similar to that at Grenfell Tower, in particular, premises where temporary evacuation procedures are in place.

28. A temporary mortuary was built in the service area. The service worked with the mortuary's responsible person to put in place suitable and reasonable fire safety measures.

### **Staff health and safety and wellbeing**

29. Staff wellbeing was a clear priority for the service during the pandemic. It 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, and access to external resources such as a GP through private healthcare services.

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 assessed government guidance and carried out specific risk assessments for those staff who were most vulnerable, and provided a forum for staff members to discuss concerns and request additional support. All wellbeing support was monitored and recorded by human resources. The service also provided advice and support to staff with regards to bereavement, financial hardship, religious observance, domestic violence and living with a vulnerable person. The service was able to provide alternative accommodation for staff to allow families to remain safe, while maintaining operational resilience.

32. Wellbeing best practice was also shared with other services. The service doesn't yet have plans to discuss with its staff the potential longer-term effects of COVID-19 on its workforce.

33. The service made sure that firefighters were competent to do their work during the pandemic. It launched a learning management system and was able to convert some core skill training to online virtual learning. On-call staff completed virtual drill nights to maintain competency. The service kept up to date with most of the firefighter fitness requirements.

34. 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 provided its workforce with appropriate 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 decreased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of days/shifts lost due to sickness absence decreased by 37.8 percent between 1 April and 30 June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019.

36. The service updated the absence policy so that it could better manage staff wellbeing and health and safety to make more effective decisions on how to allocate work. This included information about recording absences, self-isolation, testing, training for managers and bereavement. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff absent, self-isolating and 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 virtual team meetings, written correspondence and one-to-ones with a manager. The senior leadership team held a series of 'keeping in touch' calls to give staff the opportunity to share their views and provide feedback on how the service had been responding to the pandemic.

38. The service made use of telephone, email, social media, messaging services and virtual meeting platforms when communicating with on-call staff during COVID-19. The service also provided an on-call workplace group, which has 81 members. This provided key updates without requiring access to emails. Following this, on-call firefighters were also given access to their emails and the intranet via a virtual private network (VPN) on their personal devices.

39. The service intends to maintain changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19 (including virtual meetings) through continuing to introduce new technology. It will continue to allow staff to work remotely, while taking account of the value of social interaction between staff. And it will prioritise the wellbeing services it provides to all staff.

#### **Working with others, and making changes locally**

40. 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.

41. The service carried out the following new activities: providing emergency planning expertise to the excess death management cell; co-ordinating a logistics cell to distribute PPE across the Thames Valley area; and undertaking welfare visits to those who were shielding.

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

43. 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.

44. There were extra requests for work by partner agencies that fell outside the tripartite agreement, including the distribution of PPE across the Thames Valley. The service co-ordinated a collaborative approach with Thames Valley Police and the other two Thames Valley fire and rescue services. During the time the logistics cell was running, PPE was distributed to partners who were experiencing shortages.

45. The service provided support to the LRF in developing a contingency plan for transporting bodies in the event of excess deaths and in support of the LRF's wider work on the death management processes. The team worked with the LRF's death management team and co-ordinated the work to make sure that appropriate risk assessments and relationships were established with a third sector body, Berkshire Lowland Search and Rescue, to meet the plan.

46. The service responded to a request from Slough Borough Council to provide on-call staff to undertake welfare visits to residents who were shielding. This work was agreed and undertaken on time and in line with the requests from the partner agencies.

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

48. All activities to support other organisations during this period were monitored and reviewed. The service has identified which of these to continue. For example, the relationship between the South Central Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust (SCAS) and the service has been strengthened as a result of the Thames Valley collaboration request. In future, the service will provide staff to drive ambulances when it is able to do so, and there will be joint training.

#### *Local resilience forum*

49. To keep the public safe, fire and rescue services work with other organisations to assess the risk of an emergency, and to maintain plans for responding to one. To do so, the service should be an integrated and active member of its LRF – in this case Thames Valley LRF.

50. 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.

51. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the service's deputy chief fire officer acted as deputy chair to the LRF executive committee. The service chaired the PPE logistics cell, tactical co-ordinating group, and risk working group, and attended the testing cell and media advisory cell (MAC), which included being the MAC representative on the community hub working 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. Up until 30 June, its main costs were £75,000 on PPE, £11,000 on cleaning products and decontamination supplies, £56,000 on IT, £9,000 on premises changes to facilitate social distancing, and £54,000 on firefighter overtime payments. It fully understands the effect this will have on its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings. The service made savings of £9,500 from travel and subsistence mileage payments.

54. The service received £807,000 of extra government funding to support its response. By 30 June, it had spent £532,000 on technology to support remote working, PPE, cleaning products and overtime to maintain operational resilience on fire stations. It has shown how it used this income efficiently, and that it mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period. The service has put aside £275,000 to cover any additional costs relating to COVID-19 this financial year.

55. 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. The service made sure that its staff who worked overtime had enough rest between shifts.

## *Ways of working*

56. The service changed the way in which it operates during the pandemic. For example, it enabled staff to work at different locations within the service to maintain productivity. It had the necessary IT to support remote working where appropriate. Where new IT was needed, it made sure that procurement processes achieved good value for money.

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 service 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 COVID-19 pandemic, but not enough to respond to all the requests for support it received from its partner organisations. The service trained its staff to undertake ambulance driving, although they didn't end up doing this. The initial request from SCAS for drivers was picked up by other fire and rescue services in Thames Valley that had more resources available at the time. However, the service would welcome the opportunity to support future requests.

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. Extra capacity was identified and reassigned to support other areas of the service and other organisations.

62. For most of the pandemic, the main role for wholetime firefighters was to provide the service's core responsibilities, while work under the tripartite agreement and other additional work was done by other parts of the workforce. We expect the service to keep their processes under review to make sure they use their wholetime workforces as productively as possible. This approach was taken because the service felt this was the best way to make sure it had the resources it needed to meet its foreseeable risk.

63. The on-call workforce took on extra responsibilities covering some of the roles agreed as part of the tripartite agreement.

## **Governance of the service's response**

64. 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.

65. Members of Royal Berkshire Fire Authority (RBFA) were actively engaged in discussions with the chief fire officer and the service on the service's ability to discharge its statutory functions during the pandemic.

66. The RBFA maintained effective ways of working with the service during the pandemic. This made sure the service could fulfil its statutory duties as well as its extra work supporting the LRF and the tripartite arrangements. The service regularly updated the RBFA 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.

67. During the pandemic, the RBFA 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

68. 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.

69. The service is an active member of the Thames Valley collaboration group, strengthening its relationships with Thames Valley Police, local authorities, the NHS and health agencies during the pandemic. This has enabled the service to support the LRF more effectively, which, in turn, has provided better service to communities across the Thames Valley. It is looking at ways its workforce can support these organisations more consistently, especially during periods of future high demand. The service has enhanced how it communicates with staff and explored different ways of working. This has helped different parts of the workforce to connect and work together. The service also transformed its use of technology, and is considering how virtual platforms and remote working can help it become more effective and efficient.

70. Good practice and what worked was shared with other services, central government and Thames Valley Police. The service collaborated with the other Thames Valley fire and rescue services, Thames Valley Police, the NHS and health agencies on the logistics cell, which delivered more than 6m pieces of PPE to key workers. The service opened its second tri-service community fire station during the pandemic. The site is shared with Thames Valley Police and SCAS.

71. The service recognised the link between the threat of arson and the rise in domestic violence during COVID-19. All intervention work carried out following referrals from Thames Valley Police and local authority partners was shared with the other Thames Valley fire and rescue services, Thames Valley Police and SCAS.

## Next steps

72. This letter will be published on our website. We propose to restart 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 'M Parr', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

## **Matt Parr CB**

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