

# Our inspections

## Changes to our planned inspection programme

In March 2020, when the Government announced restrictions to tackle the worsening pandemic, we suspended all inspection work that would have needed appreciable input from fire and rescue services.

We did this to allow services to focus intensively on responding to the challenges caused by the pandemic. It wasn't until September 2020 that our inspection work resumed. We restarted our Round 2 inspection programme in February 2021. We have adapted to the situation and incorporated flexibility in our approach to ensure that inspection activity doesn't interfere with services' important work for the communities they serve.



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## Our work before the pandemic restrictions

In February 2020, we had just begun the second round of fire inspections. We had planned to inspect and provide graded judgments on every service in England in relation to their effectiveness, efficiency and how they look after their people.

Our aim was to replicate how we had inspected services in Round 1. This would have allowed us to consider each service's progress and how it was responding to our findings.

In February 2020, following a public consultation, the Home Secretary approved the inspection programme to enable us to do this. By then, the 15 services that were first in line for inspection had already submitted the material we had asked for to prepare for their inspection.

## Our revisits

We also started a series of revisits to services in respect of which we had logged a cause of concern relating to effectiveness in the first inspection in 2019. To date, we have completed nine revisits to seven services to consider progress.

In the period covered by this assessment, we completed three revisits: to the London Fire Brigade and Northamptonshire and West Sussex fire and rescue services. You can find information about these revisits later in this section. We have published on our website letters summarising our findings for each revisit. We had to postpone two further revisits to Essex and Gloucestershire fire and rescue services because of the pandemic. We will consider progress made by these services in Round 2.

## Our new commissions

In August 2020, we received two commissions from the Home Secretary under the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004. The first required us to consider how each fire and rescue service was responding to the pandemic. The second required us to assess the London Fire Brigade's progress in implementing the recommendations in the Grenfell Tower Inquiry's Phase 1 report.

A summary of our findings is included in this section. The specific reports are published on our website.



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## Understanding our judgments

Fire and rescue services aren't in competition with each other. Inevitably, some people may want to compare judgments and use our Round 1 gradings to form a league table. But other factors (such as each service's operating context) should be considered. We explain this context in our reports.

For our published reports in Round 1, we gave a grade – outstanding, good, requires improvement or inadequate – against all the three main questions (covering effectiveness, efficiency and people) and the 11 questions beneath them.

In all our inspections covered by this assessment, we provided a narrative explaining how the service performed rather than a graded judgment. We did this because we had no benchmark to measure against. We will go back to issuing graded judgments when Round 2 restarts.

## Our COVID-19 inspections

In August 2020, the Home Secretary commissioned us to inspect the English fire and rescue sector's response to COVID-19. Our commission, under section 28A(3) of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, was 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 completed this inspection entirely virtually, with all activity taking place remotely. This was the first time in the inspectorate's history that we had carried out an inspection in this way.

**In August 2020, the Home Secretary commissioned us to inspect the English fire and rescue sector's response to COVID-19.**



**Every service was able to respond to calls from the public, incidents and emergencies when needed.**

We inspected every service in England, requesting documents and data, running a staff survey and interviewing a number of the service's leaders. Our inspections took place in autumn 2020 and focused on the first wave of the pandemic between April and June 2020.

We also conducted a series of national interviews to build our understanding of the whole sector's response. These interviews were with the chair and committee leads of the NFCC; trade unions; representatives from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; the Local Government Association; National Employers; and ambulance trusts.



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## Our findings

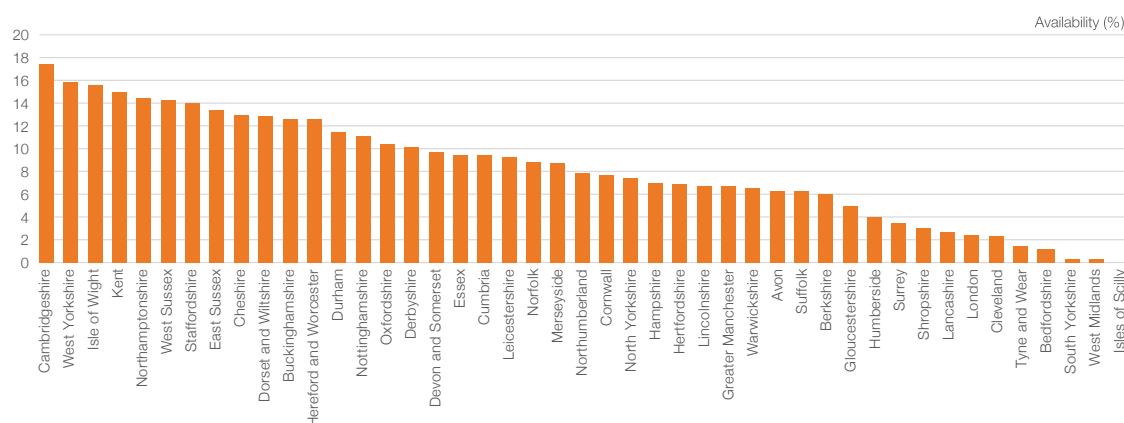
### Every service maintained its ability to respond to fires and other emergencies

Every service was able to respond to calls from the public, incidents and emergencies when needed. Most prioritised responding to emergencies over other activities such as prevention and protection. They also put in place measures to reduce the risk of exposure to the virus, ensuring that firefighters and control room staff remained available.

At the beginning of the pandemic, staff absences were thankfully low. There are several reasons for this, including steps taken by services to limit the spread of the virus in fire stations and reduce fire staff's contact with the public. Also, on-call firefighter availability was high. This was because many staff were furloughed from their primary employment or were working from home. Before the pandemic, on-call availability was often low in the working day for many services because people's working lives took them away from home.

The overall number of incidents attended by services fell by 5 percent from 1 April to 30 June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019. Fire engine availability data shows that 44 services had an overall increase in average availability from 1 April to 30 June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019; the other service had no change. Overall, availability increased by 8.2 percent during this period. Figure 1 sets out this data in detail.

Figure 1: Average percentage point change in overall availability between 1 April – 30 June 2019 and 1 April – 30 June 2020 by fire and rescue service



To support their communities during the pandemic, fire and rescue services did more than their ‘business as usual’ activities.

## Every service provided a range of additional support to its community that went above and beyond its statutory duties

The role of fire and rescue services is listed in legislation, predominantly the [Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004](#). It comprises:

- fire safety;
- firefighting;
- rescuing people in road traffic collisions;
- responding to emergencies;
- enforcing building safety regulations in the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005; and
- responding to certain incidents such as chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear emergencies.

To support their communities during the pandemic, fire and rescue services did more than their ‘business as usual’ activities. Additional pandemic work included ambulance driving, and delivering food to vulnerable people and PPE to healthcare professionals.

Most of the activities carried out were listed in the tripartite agreement, but some services provided other support to their communities under local agreement. What each service did varied and depended on what was required locally by other public authorities or organisations such as local NHS trusts and local authorities, and which part of the workforce was willing to carry it out. Some services didn’t receive any requests from other local public authorities or organisations for additional support.

While additional activity varied between services, it was provided by different staff groups, including wholetime (full-time) and on-call firefighters, as well as non-operational staff. Figure 2 contains a list of all the extra activities that took place under the tripartite agreement up until 17 September 2020.



A small number of services were asked to lend their support but couldn't provide enough wholetime firefighters to do the work because the Fire Brigades Union objected. For example, the union had concerns about risk assessments, which are ultimately the responsibility of each fire and rescue service. Other staff, including on-call firefighters and non-operational staff, were sometimes deployed instead of wholetime firefighters.

We were particularly impressed with how some county council-run services worked with council departments and colleagues to increase their knowledge of, and presence and work in, the community. This showed how fire and rescue services can benefit from being part of a larger organisation, particularly being able to share information technology (IT) and IT infrastructure, and to exchange information in the current climate.



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Figure 2: Additional pandemic activities carried out by fire and rescue services provided under the tripartite agreement between 1 April 2020 and 17 September 2020.

Additional pandemic activity listed under the tripartite agreement	Number of services out of 44
Delivering essential items to vulnerable people	33
Delivering personal protective equipment (PPE) and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities	32
Providing face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff working with COVID-19 patients	22
Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people	21
Ambulance driving	19
Moving bodies of the deceased	16
Delivering infection, prevention and control training packages for care homes, including hand hygiene products and PPE guidance and procedures, and supporting the testing of care home staff	10
Driving ambulances not on blue lights (and without a siren), excluding COVID-19 patients, to outpatient appointments or to receive urgent care	8
Taking samples for COVID-19 antigen testing	5
Training non-service personnel to drive ambulances (not on blue lights)	5
Transferring patients, including those recovering and recuperating from but no longer infected with COVID-19, to and from Nightingale hospitals under emergency response (on blue lights) or through non-emergency patient transfer (not on blue lights)	3
Transferring known or suspected COVID-19 patients to and from Nightingale hospitals under emergency response (on blue lights with a siren) or through non-emergency patient transfer (not on blue lights)	2

## The fire and rescue sector's outdated arrangements hindered the way services responded

Since we began inspecting fire and rescue services in 2018, we have made six national recommendations. Two were made at the end of our [second tranche](#) of inspections in summer 2019; there were four more in [State of Fire and Rescue 2019](#) in January 2020. These recommendations cover important structural problems relating to how the fire and rescue sector operates, including:

- better standardisation of practice;
- clarity on the role of services and their staff;
- considering whether the arrangements governing staff terms and conditions remain appropriate; and
- providing greater operational independence for chief fire officers.

All these structural problems affected the ways services operated during the pandemic and reveal the sector's current limitations. This is despite the dedication and determination of services and their staff to provide the best possible service to the public.

The call we made in [State of Fire and Rescue 2019](#) for lasting national reform remains. Reform is necessary and essential, particularly in three areas, as follows.

First, the role of services should be clarified. The need for this became especially apparent when firefighters could, in many cases, carry out additional work to support organisations such as local NHS Trusts and local authorities only after the national tripartite agreement on specific activities had come into operation.

Second, chief fire officers should have operational independence. The ability of chief fire officers to allocate resources rapidly, safely and effectively when required should be an integral part of their role. During the pandemic, Local Resilience Forums asked their fire and rescue services to assist. In some instances, services couldn't commit resources there and then, sometimes requiring a national agreement to proceed.

The call we made in [State of Fire and Rescue 2019](#) for lasting national reform remains.

**No national agreement was ever reached for how fire services could support the national vaccination programme.**

Third, arrangements governing staff terms and conditions should be reformed. Throughout the pandemic, the fire and rescue sector's motto has been 'ready, willing and able'. However, the outdated arrangements for negotiating terms and conditions of service meant that some services were unable to attain that objective as fully as they wished.

### **Tripartite agreement: varied from service to service**

The employment arrangements in the fire and rescue sector are long-standing and, in our view, outdated. The NJC oversees conditions of service for firefighters (included in the 'Grey Book'). Despite repeated calls for reform, this hasn't been reviewed for years. While it provides standard terms and conditions for firefighters, it has also established a rigid set of national arrangements. Some services have been able to put in place arrangements to adapt what they do in local circumstances. Others haven't and consider the Grey Book a barrier.

In [State of Fire and Rescue 2019](#), we called for these arrangements to be reviewed to consider whether they are still fit for purpose and whether they establish, maintain or intensify intended or unintended barriers. We also recommended that consideration should be given to whether the NJC – the pay negotiation machinery – needs reform. This recommendation remains open.

As explained earlier in Part 1, to overcome the rigidity of these arrangements, the national tripartite agreement was put in place to temporarily expand what operational staff could do during the pandemic. The agreement was between the NFCC, National Employers and the Fire Brigades Union. If additional roles were requested, they would need national agreement and further local consultation before work could start.

In March 2020, the first of 15 national tripartite agreements was agreed to increase the scope of work that operational staff could do. Each service then had to consult locally on the specific work it had been asked to do, and to agree how to address any health and safety requirements, including risk assessments.

In December 2020, the arrangements under the tripartite agreement ended and a new agreement was reached without the NFCC; the new contract was between National Employers and the Fire Brigades Union alone. Unfortunately, no further extensions could be made due to a disagreement between National Employers and the Fire Brigades Union on health and safety measures. The arrangement therefore expired on 13 January 2021. As a result, no national agreement was ever reached for how fire services could support the national vaccination programme.



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## There were national and local problems implementing the tripartite agreement.

At the time of publication, the NFCC has produced and disseminated to services risk assessments that list necessary control measures services need to put in place for their staff when carrying out extra pandemic activities. National Employers support the risk assessments, and the onus is now on operational staff to volunteer to step forward for their communities. This can be done under local agreements specifying the work operational staff in each individual service will be doing.

The tripartite agreement played a role in enabling services to use their staff in different ways, such as driving ambulances and delivering food to vulnerable people. Its objective was pragmatic and rooted in all parties' desire to help the public. But, in some cases, it had a limiting or even negative effect, including creating delays to activity already underway.

There were national and local problems implementing the tripartite agreement, which became too prescriptive. For example, services were only able to deliver items to the most vulnerable people once that specific activity had been listed in a national tripartite agreement. If it had focused on broad principles, the agreement would have given individual services the flexibility to make decisions on how to deploy staff.

Because of the restrictive nature of the tripartite agreement, several services used other staff, such as non-operational employees, whose work was not covered by the tripartite agreement to do this additional work. Deploying non-operational staff was often quicker and easier than using wholtime firefighters, even though they may not have had the same skills. We also found that services were able to deploy their on-call staff more flexibly by offering them additional hours and secondment contracts.

## The pandemic demonstrated what on-call firefighters and non-operational staff offer fire and rescue services and the public

Most services have on-call firefighters. They are generally employed on a part-time basis in locations where the local risk doesn't require full-time fire cover. They are firefighters who may have other jobs, but who respond to emergencies when called. Fire and rescue services used them extensively during the first wave of the pandemic to respond to emergencies, as well as to provide additional support to their communities.

The majority of on-call firefighters were available to support their fire and rescue services as needed; this was because many were furloughed from their primary employment or working from home. Consequently, most services with on-call staff had more fire engines available to respond to emergencies than before the pandemic.

On-call firefighters were willing to work flexibly to do a range of work, including delivering food to vulnerable people, supporting local ambulance trusts and covering staff absences.

Services took steps to mitigate any financial hardship the on-call firefighters might have faced if their main employment was affected by the pandemic. This included offering them paid employment or short-term contracts.

Non-operational staff (including those who work in non-uniformed roles, such as prevention) also volunteered to help. Services told us of their willingness and ability to assist.

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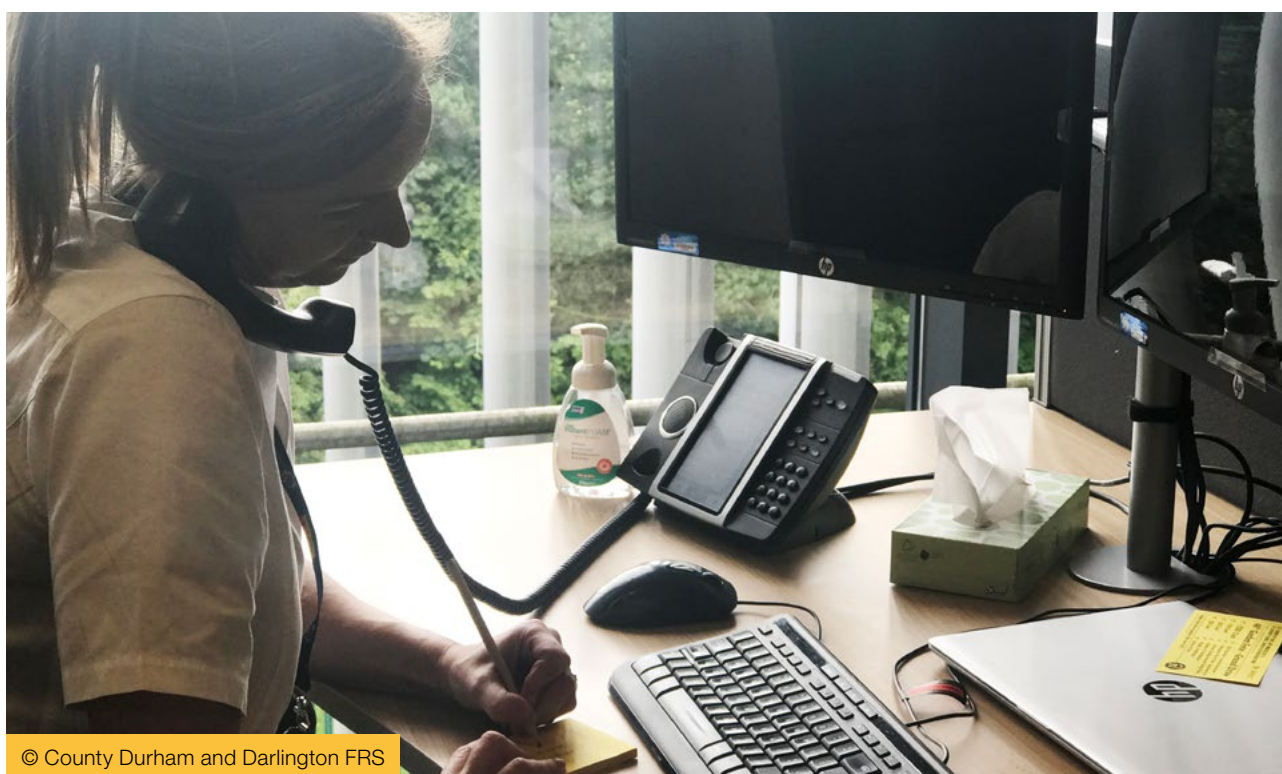
On-call firefighters were willing to work flexibly to do a range of work.

## The way services maintained statutory prevention and protection functions varied, and some did less than expected

Services have had to balance the need to act responsibly during a public health emergency – working out how to reduce the risk of exposure to the virus – with meeting their statutory obligation to promote fire safety and enforce fire safety legislation.

The NFCC provided advice on how services could maintain a risk-based approach to prevention and protection activity. However, not every service followed the NFCC guidance. During the early stages of the pandemic, four services exceeded the requirements of the guidance while eight stopped most protection activity.

In the first round of our inspections, between 2018 and 2019, we raised concerns that too many services didn't see their protection function as a high-enough priority, and had underinvested in it for many years. It is a matter of concern that some services have chosen to deprioritise it during the pandemic.



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## The wellbeing measures offered to staff during COVID-19 were generally good, but varied

We saw that services placed importance on staff wellbeing. Some stepped up their wellbeing provision and tailored it to the outbreak, directing staff to additional help when necessary. However, more could have been done in a third of services to make sure that staff who may have been at greater risk, such as those from a BAME background, were identified and appropriate measures put in place to provide them with relevant support.

We were pleased to find evidence of these special arrangements in 29 services. Guidance from [PHE](#) says some people may not be prepared to disclose their individual circumstances. It is incumbent on services to talk to all their staff to identify risks and provide appropriate support.

## The pandemic was a catalyst for change and transformation

In our first inspections (between 2018 and 2019), we found that a small number of services had done little to modernise their ways of working. The pandemic changed that dramatically for the better.

Some services implemented improvement programmes within days of the first lockdown being announced, rolling out new IT and supporting infrastructure. Existing improvement programmes were brought forward and implemented in weeks rather than months. And existing barriers preventing the exchange of information between fire services and other public organisations and local authorities were removed.

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## The Grenfell Tower Inquiry was established to examine the circumstances leading up to, and surrounding, the fire.

This mostly benefited non-operational staff whose working lives have been significantly changed with the introduction of digital and flexible working in many services. However, this rarely translated into improvements in the working practices or productivity of operational staff, including firefighters. Services should take their experience of digital and workplace reform and use it to make firefighters' time as productive as possible. This could include providing prevention advice remotely to vulnerable people.

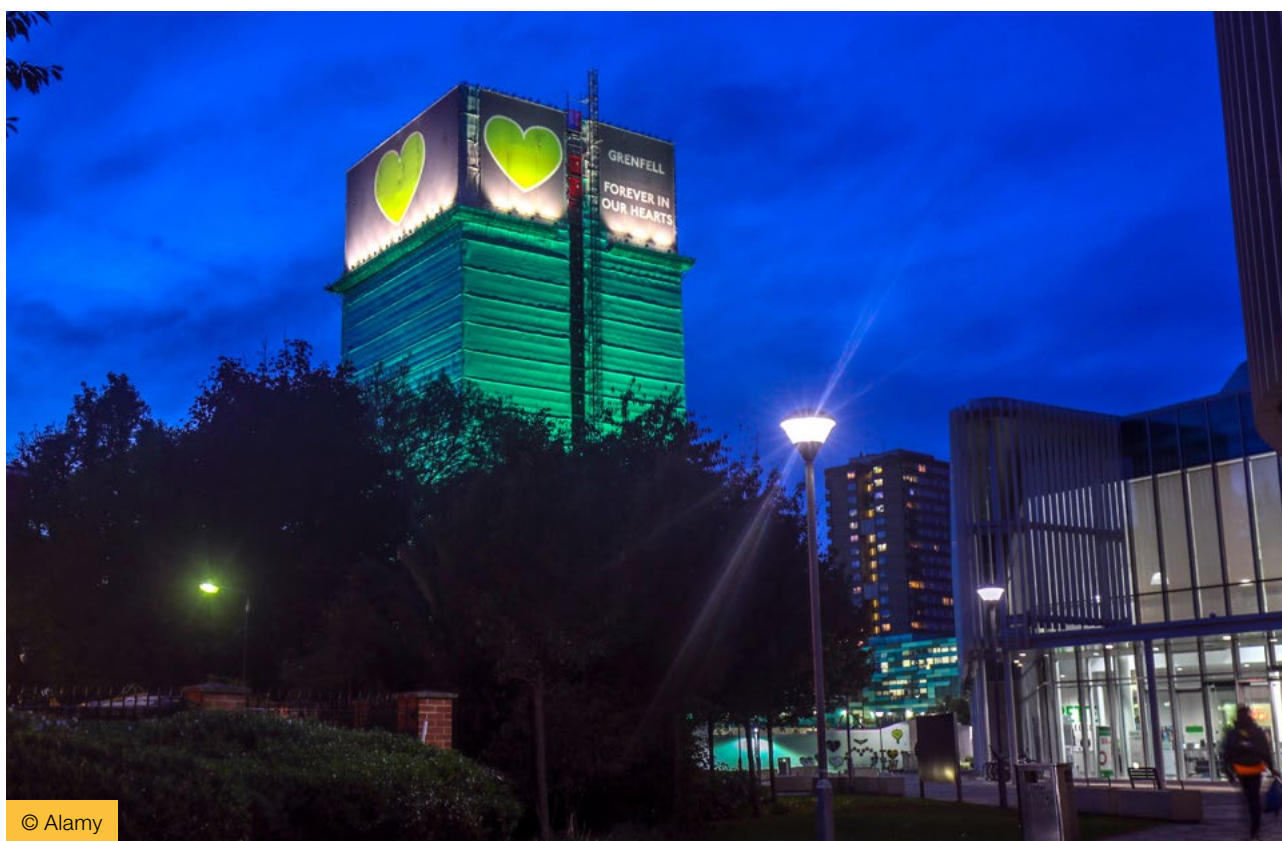
When the pandemic began, services implemented changes, such as redeploying staff, reducing community activity and changing working practices, in anticipation of much higher sickness levels. Thankfully, these sickness levels had failed to materialise at the time of inspection. However, some services were slow to undo their changes, whether by returning redeployed staff or restarting activity that had been stopped.

## The London Fire Brigade and the recommendations of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry

On 14 June 2017, a fire at Grenfell Tower, a high-rise residential building in North Kensington, London, cost 72 lives.

The Grenfell Tower Inquiry was established to examine the circumstances leading up to, and surrounding, the fire. The inquiry was in two phases. Phase 1 focused on what happened on the night. The Phase 1 report, which includes findings and recommendations, was published on 30 October 2019. Phase 2 will establish what caused the disaster, and will assess the effectiveness of building and fire safety systems. This phase of the inquiry is underway.

In December 2019, as part of our first inspections of all fire and rescue services in England, we published our report on the performance of the London Fire Brigade. Our findings were consistent with the conclusions of the Phase 1 report.



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We found that, while the London Fire Brigade had learned lessons from the Grenfell Tower fire, it had been slow to put in place the changes needed. We identified a cause of concern as to how well trained and skilled the London Fire Brigade staff were. We found that the London Fire Brigade had a significant backlog of training for staff in risk-critical skills such as incident command.

On 4 August 2020, the Home Secretary commissioned us to review the governance and progress of the London Fire Brigade's action plan to implement the recommendations in the Phase 1 Report.

Because of Government restrictions relating to the pandemic, we carried out our inspection virtually during late 2020. We published our findings in February 2021.

While progress is being made, there remains a significant amount still to do.

## Our findings

At the time of our inspection in late 2020, the brigade had implemented four of the Inquiry's 29 recommendations for which they were responsible. It expects to have implemented 17 more by March 2021. This includes 12 that have been delayed by three months or more. While progress is being made, there remains a significant amount still to do.

## Governance

### Better co-ordination is being put in place, but assurance arrangements must improve fast

Work is underway to implement the inquiry's recommendations. The brigade is improving how it manages and co-ordinates this work. But the public needs to know that, if there were an incident as potentially catastrophic as the Grenfell Tower fire, the brigade's response would be much better.

A year passed between publication of the inquiry's recommendations and our inspection. Arrangements are now in place to track what is being done to implement the recommendations, but more is needed to identify the links between different projects. The brigade needs to accelerate its improvement work so that it can invest its energy in making a difference to the way it serves the public.

Implementing the inquiry's recommendations is a priority for the commissioner and the brigade's leadership. However, the brigade needs to improve how it manages its different work plans to bring greatest benefit to public safety. The way the brigade monitors progress and manages risk is inconsistent. There is significant overlap between different areas of work. A large amount of activity is planned for the first half of 2021, but it isn't clear how the brigade will achieve this in the light of the complexity of some of this work and the number of people it will need.

The brigade has recently taken steps to improve assurance, including by establishing an independent audit committee, but it needs to do more. In particular, assurance processes need to be better so that leaders can be confident that the brigade's improvement programme is being efficiently and effectively carried out.

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**Inspecting more high-rise residential buildings is a priority for fire safety officers in the London Fire Brigade.**

The brigade recognises that it needs to improve and is now starting to accelerate its work to improve. Its new transformation board and director of transformation are focusing on co-ordinating plans and risks. They use dashboards to give a clear understanding of progress against deadlines. More staff are being appointed. They include new programme managers to support the improvement process, and consultants to help develop an approach to different areas of work and to improve leaders' skills in managing change in the organisation.

### **More high-rise residential buildings are being inspected, and more often**

Inspecting more high-rise residential buildings is a priority for the brigade's fire safety officers. They are inspecting more, and more often. The brigade is on target to inspect or review the safety of all high-rise residential buildings in London by the end of 2021. This is in line with the Building Risk Review, a Government-funded scheme for England. We welcome this improvement.

The brigade has also identified the need to improve its competency in fire safety. Retaining staff with the right skills and experience has been difficult, so it is focusing on developing staff's specialist skills. The brigade has also started to train firefighters to complete fire safety visits to lower-risk buildings.



The London Fire Brigade has acted quickly in some areas to strengthen its response to fires in high-rise residential buildings.

## Evacuation and operational risk

### Changed policies are starting to be introduced and staff are being trained

The brigade has acted quickly in some areas to strengthen its response to fires in high-rise residential buildings. It sends more commanders, more fire engines and better-targeted specialist resources, such as vehicles with extended height ladders, to incidents than it did before the Grenfell Tower fire.

The brigade also provided fire escape hoods, called 'smoke hoods', to all fire stations at the end of 2018. These hoods can be worn by members of the public when they evacuate smoke-filled areas.

Updated policies on high-rise firefighting and fire survival guidance, and a new policy on evacuation and rescue, are planned to be in place by April 2021. The new and updated policies are detailed and take account of what the brigade learned from the Grenfell Tower fire. A comprehensive training programme on the new policies for incident commanders and firefighters has begun. All are receiving e-learning on the new policies, with a knowledge test at the end. At the time of our inspection, most staff had completed this training.



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## More practical training in the new working practices is needed

All staff we spoke to said they need more practical training on the new and updated working practices. Exercises are being planned at stations with scenarios involving high-rise residential buildings. For 18 months from April 2021, the brigade will carry out practical exercises at high-rise buildings. But at the time of our inspection, the planning and scheduling for these exercises hadn't yet started and suitable venues still needed to be found.

Incident commanders consistently told us that they would use their discretion to put some training into practice immediately if appropriate, even though the policies don't come into effect until the end of March 2021. We were given several recent examples of this being done. Although we welcome this, the brigade needs to assure itself that the lessons learned from the fire will be consistently applied by incident commanders.

## Staff better understand the risk of building materials

Information and training have improved staff understanding of the risks and signs of fire in external high-rise walls. Nearly all incident commanders and firefighters we spoke to feel better prepared to deal with such incidents than before the Grenfell Tower fire.

There is greater emphasis on carrying out risk assessments at high-rise residential buildings. And the brigade's new quality assurance process for these assessments is robust. Better information is being made available about the operational risks that firefighters are likely to face when responding to incidents.

We welcome the greater focus given to assessing risks at high-rise residential buildings, and providing better information for firefighters and commanders attending incidents. The brigade has shown that it has a strong grasp on this activity and effective assurance arrangements in place to support it.

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We welcome the greater focus given to assessing risks at high-rise residential buildings.

## Control room

### Good progress is being made but supervisors need more training

The brigade is making good progress with the improvements needed in its control room. It is working to make fire control more central to its operational response. Staff are included more in policy design and training. Regular refresher training is in place for staff.

The updated fire survival guidance (FSG) policy, which control room staff helped to develop, is planned to take effect at the end of March 2021. FSG training has taken place and more is planned on the updated FSG guidance and new IT systems. Plans are in place for control room staff to be involved in the high-rise building exercises proposed to start in April 2021. Control room managers have a critical role in fire survival, and training for their role in co-ordinating an FSG response is still being developed.

### Better technology is being introduced to help rescue people trapped by fire

The brigade has made improvements to its command and control system to help handle multiple calls from the public when they're trapped by fire. It has also developed an FSG application that is in its final stages of testing. These innovative and positive changes are designed to improve the information available to incident commanders from the control room so that they can prioritise rescue action.

A national radio talk group has been set up so that a control room can immediately let other fire and rescue services know when they're dealing with a major incident. Other control rooms can then provide support with handling FSG calls if needed. This should mean that members of the public reporting fires and other emergencies speak to control operators who have better awareness of the incident.



The brigade is in the process of replacing its command unit vehicles and buying a new IT operating system to be used on the replacements. The new system is designed to be more reliable than the previous version, and training in its use is being provided. The brigade is also making changes to the way the new vehicles are staffed and where they operate from. It has increased staffing levels and more station-based staff are being trained to operate the new vehicles. There will be closer working and training between control room and command unit staff in future. This includes taking part in exercises.

**There will be closer working and training between control room and command unit staff in future.**



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The London Fire Brigade has made the competence of its incident commanders a priority.

## Incident command

### Incident command training and competence assessment remain risks

Incident command training and assessing competence remain risks for the brigade. The improvements will take time to introduce. Some plans have already been delayed because there aren't enough staff with the right skills.

Many of the inquiry's recommendations relating to incident command need incident commanders to be trained in revised or new working practices. The brigade has made the competence of its incident commanders a priority and has allocated more staff to work with its training provider to design new courses. It has started developing new training courses for Levels 1 and 2 incident commanders. (Incident command levels range from 1 to 4: commanders trained to the higher levels usually take charge of complex incidents that involve more resources.) But the limited number of staff able to design these courses is causing delays.

Meanwhile, the brigade has funded more courses from external training providers. This has ensured that Levels 3 and 4 incident commanders have had the right training. The brigade has started to introduce assessments for incident commanders similar to those in place in other fire and rescue services. Only a limited number of brigade staff have the skills to carry out assessments; this shortage is delaying the assessments.

## Communication at incidents is getting better, but new equipment will take time to arrive

The inquiry recommended improvements to the way the incident commander and control room co-ordinate firefighters involved in rescues in buildings. The new and revised policies include processes to track rescue action being carried out by crews entering the building with breathing apparatus. The incident commanders and firefighters we spoke to have a good level of knowledge and understanding of these new procedures.

There is a comprehensive project to improve communications between the incident commander, command units and control room. This includes buying better radios to use at an incident, and devices to boost radio signals. It also aims to improve the communication to and from firefighters wearing helmets and breathing apparatus. This project is being carried out in stages and, at the time of our inspection, isn't scheduled to be fully in place until May 2022.



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The London Fire Brigade has started to improve how it works with other emergency services when responding to a major incident.

## Working with emergency services

### Joint working with other emergency services is improving, but more training is needed

Recommendations in this area need other London emergency services or national organisations to work together with the brigade. The brigade is acting to address the recommendations and, when appropriate, to amend or create guidance for its staff.

The brigade has started to improve how it works with other emergency services when responding to a major incident. In the early stages of an incident, information is now exchanged with other services more consistently; this results in a better, more comprehensive response.

The brigade has acted to make sure that the lessons learned from the Phase 1 report are applied across all London's emergency service control rooms (for example, in the Metropolitan Police Service's and London Ambulance Service's control rooms). But still more work needs to be done to incorporate the recommendations into guidance, both nationally and in London. Training needs to be improved for the brigade's incident commanders and fire control staff. Technology intended to improve the sharing of incident information between London's emergency services is due to be installed by autumn 2021.

## Our revisits

In Round 1, we gave services areas for improvement and, in some cases, causes of concern.

If we identify an aspect of a service's practice, policy or performance that falls short of the expected standard, we will report this as an area for improvement. If we identify a serious, critical or systemic shortcoming in a service's practice, policy or performance, we will report it as a cause of concern.

A cause of concern will always be accompanied by one or more recommendations. The Fire and Rescue National Framework for England requires the fire and rescue authority receiving a recommendation to prepare, update and regularly publish an action plan detailing how it will act on the recommendation(s).

If we identify a cause of concern relating to effectiveness, we always follow it up with a revisit. This is to assess whether the service is acting to address the problem to reduce risks to public safety.

We have now conducted revisits to eight services to assess progress against their cause(s) of concern. With the exception of the London Fire Brigade, whose cause of concern related to people, these revisits covered effectiveness. Letters detailing our findings are published on our website and sent to the services involved.

Service	Original inspection fieldwork	First revisit	Follow-up revisit (if needed)
Avon	July 2018	October 2018	August 2019
Cornwall	July 2018	October 2018	N/A
Essex	July 2019	November 2019	Outstanding – to be included in Round 2
Gloucestershire	June 2019	November 2019	Outstanding – to be included in Round 2
London	July 2019	October to December 2020	Summer 2021
Northamptonshire	November 2018	June 2019	March 2020
Surrey	July 2018	October 2018	September 2019
West Sussex	November 2018	February 2019	January 2020

Causes of concern were also given to services in relation to their efficiency (Buckinghamshire and Surrey) and how they look after their people (Devon & Somerset, Essex, Gloucestershire, Greater Manchester, Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Lincolnshire and West Sussex). In Round 2, we will assess what progress has been and is being made.

**We found action was being taken to address this problem, although further work is needed.**

During the period covered by this assessment, we published three letters: one providing our findings from our first revisit to the London Fire Brigade, and two with the findings of our second revisits to Northamptonshire and West Sussex fire and rescue services.

## The London Fire Brigade

As part of our inspection of the progress being made by the brigade to implement the recommendations in the Grenfell Tower Inquiry's Phase 1 report, we also considered progress to address the cause of concern we had in our Round 1 inspection; this concerned staff training and skills.

Specifically, the brigade had a significant backlog of training for staff on risk-critical skills such as emergency fire engine driving and incident command. Some emergency vehicle drivers hadn't had refresher training for up to 20 years (despite national guidance recommending this to be provided every three to five years). New incident commanders didn't get the training they needed until after they had taken up an incident command role and had begun to command real incidents. In some cases, this wasn't until up to a year later. We also found examples of firefighters acting as incident commanders who had received no training or assessment. The brigade also hadn't been providing regular incident command training and re-assessment so that staff had up-to-date knowledge, skills and understanding, and could continue to command at a competent and safe standard.

We found action was being taken to address this problem, although further work is needed. The brigade has made training in emergency driving a priority and has increased the amount of training available. At the time of our revisit, data provided by the brigade showed that the percentage of staff up to date in their training and assessment for emergency fire engine driving had increased from 68 percent (1,384 of 2,023) in November 2019 to 96 percent (1,642 of 1,711) in December 2020.



The brigade is also focusing on ensuring the competence of its incident commanders. The brigade now has an ambitious training strategy, but it will take several years to put in place and some parts aren't yet fully funded. Incident commanders still aren't being trained quickly enough.

We are encouraged by the brigade's efforts since our last inspection to make risk-critical training a priority. However, despite improvements, incident command training and assessing competence remain risks. The planned improvements will take time to introduce. And some plans have already been delayed because there aren't enough staff with the right skills. We will continue to monitor progress through updates from the brigade and data returns. We will revisit the brigade in summer 2021 to consider what further progress has been achieved.



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## Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service

We gave the service two causes of concern in Round 1 in relation to operational response and staff training.

We have now completed two revisits to consider the progress being made in relation to these connected problems.

We published our findings after both revisits; the findings from our second revisit were published in March 2020.

Following our second revisit, we were pleased to see the positive progress the service had made to address both these problems. The service has treated making the necessary improvements as a priority.

The tangible improvements we saw have mitigated the risks to public safety that we identified in our original inspection. The measures that the service has introduced to improve fire engine availability are proving effective, with greater availability than when we first inspected.

At the time of our second revisit, in data provided by the service covering November 2019 to February 2020, the service had the minimum number of fire engines needed between 95 percent and 99 percent of the time. This was a very substantial improvement since our first inspection. The service had caught up with giving its staff the safety-critical training they needed. We were encouraged by the systems being put in place by the service to monitor training.

To implement these actions, the service has produced detailed action plans with specified staff given responsibility for particular work. There are effective governance arrangements within the service and through the police, fire and crime commissioner to scrutinise progress. We also recognised what the service had done to produce better performance data and management information. Managers we interviewed at all levels showed a thorough understanding of this new information, which has helped decision making and made improvements a priority.

We propose to further consider what additional work is being implemented when we next inspect the service in Round 2.

The service has treated making the necessary improvements as a priority.

We found that the service had improved, driven by its senior leaders.

## West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service

In Round 1, we gave the service four causes of concern in relation to prevention, protection, values and culture, and ensuring fairness and promoting diversity.

We have now completed two revisits to consider the progress being made in relation to their prevention and protection causes of concern. We published our findings after both revisits: the findings from our second revisit were published in February 2020.

We found that the service had improved, driven by its senior leaders. While early progress had been slow, this was now improving. The service had cleared its backlogs in 'safe and well' visits and fire safety audits. Progress had also been made to increase staff numbers. Staff felt supported and welcomed the increased speed of the improvements.

The service has an action plan with senior responsible officers, deadlines and specific people responsible for actions to meet the requirements of each recommendation. The service has created an improvement board to oversee progress and monitor risk. The appointment of a skilled and dedicated programme manager has added benefit in prioritising and co-ordinating action.

In July 2019, West Sussex County Council approved £5.1m of extra funding to support improvements to address the causes of concern over the next three years. It also approved funding for a replacement IT system to overcome concerns we had found with the previous one. The council's governance and scrutiny arrangements were also changing to become more effective. At the time of our revisit in early 2020, some of these new arrangements had only recently been introduced, and others were due to start imminently.

The service was beset with problems when we first inspected. We were encouraged by the way it had improved, something we will consider further in Round 2.





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