

Matt Parr CB

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

Chris Lowther
Chief Fire Officer
Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service

Tony Taylor
Chair
Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Lowther and Cllr Taylor,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: TYNE AND WEAR 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. We inspected your service between 28 September and 9 October 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

5. In relation to your service, Northumbria Local Resilience Forum (LRF) declared a major incident on 25 March 2020.

6. In summary, the service continued to meet all its statutory duties, as well as extra demands placed on it to support partner agencies and the local community. The service prepared itself well in anticipating the challenges presented by COVID-19 and the national measures to reduce the spread of the virus. Measures taken included changes to planning, staffing, training,

communication and the provision of technology. New ways of working were introduced in the service, and with the LRF and the fire and rescue authority.

7. Recently retired staff were re-engaged and trained to provide operational resilience and support the creation of a logistics cell. This cell took responsibility for receiving and distributing personal protective equipment (PPE) and other essential items across the region and Cumbria, supported local hospitals with body movement, and provided training to the voluntary sector. It also put in place arrangements to provide support for the North East Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust, although fortunately the need for extra ambulance drivers didn't materialise.

8. The service continued to recruit wholetime staff to the service – even at the height of the pandemic it was training 24 firefighters at the dedicated training centre. It also appointed an interim assistant chief fire officer after a planned retirement.

9. Communication and engagement from the executive leadership team has been described as positive, and this has contributed to safeguarding staff wellbeing. Vulnerable groups were identified early, and measures were put in place to protect the health, safety and wellbeing of staff.

10. We recognise that the arrangements for managing the pandemic may carry on for some time, and that the service is now planning for the future. In order to be as efficient and effective as possible, Tyne and Wear 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 community risk profiles, of both people and premises, to take account of the changes the pandemic has caused. It should make sure that its prevention and protection activity remains focused on those areas at highest risk.

(c) It should make sure wholetime firefighters are fully productive, while minimising the risk of them contracting or spreading the virus.

(d) It should consider how it can give further digital tools to operational firefighters, as it has for other staff. This will allow them to work remotely more effectively and efficiently (for prevention, protection, risk, training, etc).

Preparing for the pandemic

11. In line with good governance, the service had a pandemic flu plan and business continuity plans in place which were in date. These plans were activated.

12. The plans were detailed enough to enable the service to make an effective initial response, but understandably they didn't anticipate and mitigate all the risks presented by COVID-19.

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

14. 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 and support functions, social distancing, making premises COVID secure, home working and the supply of PPE.

Fulfilling statutory functions

15. 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.

16. 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 attend emergencies.

Response

17. 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.

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

19. The overall availability of fire engines was broadly the same during the pandemic as it was during the same period in 2019. Between 1 April and 30 June 2020, the service's average overall fire engine availability was 94 percent compared with 93 percent during the same period in 2019. The service told us this was as a result of an increased number of on-call firefighters being available to respond to emergencies because of being furloughed from their primary employment.

20. The service told us that its average response time to fires remained broadly the same during the pandemic compared with the same period in 2019. This was due to being able to maintain similar staffing levels, despite the pandemic. 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.

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

22. This included effective resilience arrangements, such as an early decision to introduce strict control measures to insulate control room staff from physical contact with other staff members, making sure that its fallback arrangements were robust, and re-engaging former control room staff for added resilience.

Prevention

23. The NFCC issued guidance explaining how services should maintain a risk-based approach to its prevention activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. The service broadly adopted this guidance.
24. The service conducted fewer safe and well visits than it normally would. It didn't review those individuals and groups it considered to be at an increased risk from fire as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
25. The service continued to offer face-to-face safe and well visits on a risk-assessed basis and provided staff with suitable PPE for these visits.
26. As an alternative to face-to-face safe and well visits, the service introduced the option of a safe and well visit by telephone. It also introduced other options, including having relatives fit smoke alarms that it provided.

Protection

27. The NFCC issued guidance on how to continue protection activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes maintaining a risk-based approach, completing desktop audits and issuing enforcement notices electronically. The service broadly adopted this guidance.
28. The service reviewed how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic. This review resulted in some premises types being prioritised as higher risk, such as student accommodation and hospitals.
29. The service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it normally would. It decided to continue face-to-face fire safety audits and enforcement work on a risk-assessed basis and provided staff with suitable PPE for these. It introduced risk-based desktop appraisals as an alternative to face-to-face audits to minimise face-to-face contact between members of staff and the public.
30. The service continued to issue alteration notices, enforcement notices and prohibition notices, and continued to respond to statutory building control consultations.
31. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as using telephone and/or email to make the initial contact, using video conferencing/live streaming, using electronic documents to replace hard-copy letters, and reducing the number of staff on visits.
32. The service has continued to engage with those responsible for fire safety in high-risk premises with cladding like that at Grenfell Tower, especially premises with temporary evacuation procedures in place.
33. An NHS Nightingale hospital was set up at Washington. The service worked with the hospital's responsible person to put in place suitable and reasonable fire safety measures.

Staff health and safety and wellbeing

34. Staff wellbeing was a clear priority for the service during the pandemic. It proactively identified wellbeing problems and responded to any concerns and further needs. Senior leaders actively promoted wellbeing services and encouraged staff to discuss any worries they had.

35. 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; specialist counselling and internal support; peer support; and access to external resources, such as BUPA webinars on mental wellbeing.

36. Staff most at risk from 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. Staff from high-risk groups were identified through personal risk assessments and were supported to work from home, including by developing the service's IT facilities to support engagement and communication.

37. Wellbeing best practice was also shared with other services. The service has discussed with its staff how it should plan for the potential longer-term effects of COVID-19 on its workforce.

38. The service made sure that firefighters were competent to do their work during the pandemic. This included keeping up to date with most of the firefighter fitness requirements.

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

40. The service 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

41. Absences have decreased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of days/shifts lost due to sickness absence decreased by 28 percent between 1 April and 30 June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019.

42. The service updated its absence policy so that it could better manage staff wellbeing and health and safety, and 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 either absent, shielding, self-isolating or working from home.

Staff engagement

43. 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 bulletins and updates, as well as virtual team meetings and one-to-ones using WhatsApp and FaceTime. The service also developed a bespoke system, called the Portal, to assist staff with wellbeing and health and safety.

44. The service intends to maintain changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19, including its approach to working from home and agile working, and its use of the Portal to communicate with staff, as part of its usual processes.

Working with others, and making changes locally

45. To protect communities, fire and rescue service staff, including firefighters, were encouraged to carry out additional 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: helping to receive, distribute and deliver PPE across the region; delivering food and medical supplies; helping to move bodies on behalf of the LRF; and supporting the repurposing of existing premises into a Nightingale hospital.

47. A national 'tripartite agreement' was put in place to cover the new activities that firefighters could carry out during the pandemic. The agreement was between the NFCC, Fire & Rescue Services National Employers and the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), and specified what new roles firefighters could agree to during the pandemic. Each service then consulted locally 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 outside the tripartite agreement, the specifics would need to be agreed nationally before the work could start.

48. The service consulted locally with the FBU to implement the tripartite agreement.

49. Other unions were engaged, including UNISON and GMB, if their members were asked to do extra work, including that covered by the tripartite agreement.

50. All new work done by the service under the tripartite agreement was agreed in time for it to start promptly and in line with the request from the partner agency.

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

52. The service hasn't yet fully reviewed and evaluated its activities to support other organisations during this period, and it hasn't identified which to continue.

Local resilience forum

53. 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. Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service is a member of Northumbria LRF.

54. The service was an active member of the LRF during the pandemic. The service told us that the LRF's arrangements were generally suitable. But it experienced difficulties working with local partners in the early stages of the pandemic while formal structures were being established.

55. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the service actively participated in the strategic co-ordinating group and chaired the tactical co-ordinating group. It was a member of the logistics cell; excess deaths management group; volunteer group; vulnerability group; business continuity group; and PPE group. The service was able to allocate suitably qualified staff to participate in these groups without affecting its core duties.

Use of resources

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

57. 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 £111,100 on PPE; £30,400 on cleaning and decontamination supplies; £44,100 on ICT; and £50,600 on extra cleaning activities. It fully understands the effect this will have on its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings. Where possible, it has exploited opportunities to make savings during this period and used them to mitigate any financial risks it has identified, such as saving £68,000 on vehicle fuels, including the use of BP's offer of free fuel for emergency services.

58. The service received £1.12m of extra government funding to support its response. At the time of inspection, the service had spent £499,686 of this on PPE, IT and estates. 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 didn't use any of its reserves to meet the extra costs that arose during this period. This didn't affect its ability to maintain the smooth running of its service.

60. Overtime wasn't used to manage the service's response.

Ways of working

61. The service changed how it operates during the pandemic. For example, it changed how it conducted home visits for fire prevention; identified and targeted business premises for fire safety audits; communicated and engaged with staff; and took on new roles in the community to support local partners. It had the necessary IT to support remote working where appropriate. Where new IT was needed, it made sure that its procurement processes achieved good value for money.

62. The service was able to implement changes to how it operated. 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.

63. The service has 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 to consider how they can be developed further to help promote a sustainable change to its working culture.

64. 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

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

66. Arrangements put in place to monitor staff performance across the service were effective. This meant it 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.

67. In the initial phase of the pandemic, the service made the strategic decision to protect frontline operational resources to ensure operational response and delivery of statutory duties. Additional duties to support the community, including those under the tripartite agreement, were resourced by the wider workforce. We expect services to keep their processes under review to make sure they use their wholetime workforces as productively as possible.

68. 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.

69. Work under the tripartite agreement was provided by both operational and non-operational support staff from service headquarters, and from other areas such as fire prevention and fire protection.

70. Although the service had increased the availability of its on-call workforce, they weren't used for extra work during the pandemic.

71. As part of its workforce planning, the service re-engaged retired members of staff to provide resilience across operational roles and to support its work under the agreed changes.

72. The service gave appropriate consideration to making sure its re-engaged staff were operationally competent for the work they were asked to do.

Governance of the service's response

73. 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.

74. Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority was actively engaged in discussions with the chief fire officer and the service on the service's ability to discharge its statutory functions during the pandemic.

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

76. The service regularly updated the fire and rescue authority about how it was responding to the pandemic and the extra activities of its staff. This included work carried out as part of the tripartite arrangements.

77. During the pandemic, the fire and rescue authority continued to provide oversight of the service, including its decision-making process, and was consulted about decisions it made. The authority delegated emergency powers to the chief fire officer, as it recognised the critical nature of this incident, and the need for the chief fire officer to be able to quickly adapt the service's response to effectively support its staff and communities. The authority maintained regular communication with the chief fire officer and received the service's written briefings.

Looking to the future

78. 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.

79. Good practice and what worked was shared with other services through the NFCC. This includes use of bespoke IT to engage with staff (the Portal); taking a triage approach to home fire safety checks and safe and well visits; using a desktop approach for fire safety audits; using remote working for prevention and protection activities, including online modules for the Prince's Trust syllabus for young people; setting up and running a logistics cell; and assisting with the management of excess deaths.

Next steps

80. 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 'MP' followed by a stylized flourish and a diagonal line.

Matt Parr CB

Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary