

Dru Sharpling

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

Chief Fire Officer Gavin Watts
West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service
County Hall
Chichester
West Sussex PO19 1RG

20 June 2019

Dear Gavin,

WEST SUSSEX FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE REVISIT

We inspected West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service (WSFRS) the week of 26 November 2018. During the inspection we identified several areas of concern. We shared the following causes of concern with the service:

- (a) The inspection team identified the lack of clear management and oversight of the home safety visit (HSV) process. As a result, between 400 and 500 high-risk checks had not been completed. Furthermore, the team highlighted to you concerns about the way in which information was managed through your paper-based HSV process.
 - (b) The inspection team identified concerns about the service's risk-based inspection programme (RBIP) and the database being used to manage this work. The service could not demonstrate how it prioritises its protection work to target the premises of highest risk. We could not see how the capacity within the protection team would meet the demands of the service's RBIP and, therefore, how it would meet the priorities set in the service's integrated risk management plan (IRMP).
2. You submitted an action plan setting out how you plan to address our areas of concern.
 3. We revisited WSFRS between 25 and 26 February 2019 to review progress against your action plan. We didn't expect to see all the remedial work completed but were looking for evidence of progress. We explored the following areas of the action plan:
 - (a) Objective 1: Develop and implement a revised process for the management of HSVs, specifically those deemed 'high risk' and referred to WSFRS by external partners. The new process will consider existing backlogs and anticipated future demand, and match resources to satisfy these.

(b) Objective 2: Develop and implement a revised process for the management of the service's risk-based inspection programme to ensure 'high risk' premises are targeted as a priority, and ensure that staffing and resources meet current and future demand.

(c) Objective 3: Implement a robust and proven IT solution to meet the requirements of prevention and protection activities across WSFRS.

4. During the revisit we interviewed staff who were responsible for implementing the action plan. We also interviewed you as the operational lead for the service, as well as the councillor with lead responsibility for the service and the executive director for communities and public protection at West Sussex County Council. We concluded the revisit by giving you feedback on our findings. Our findings are as follows:

Governance

5. We found that appropriate governance structures to oversee the completion of the action plan have been put in place. These include within the service and in the county council through the executive director of the council and cabinet member with responsibility for fire and rescue. Progress against the action plan is monitored by the service's senior leadership team at weekly and monthly meetings. The service proposes to take updates on progress against the action plan to future meetings of the fire authority and council's cabinet, for oversight and scrutiny.

Action plan

6. The service has developed an action plan covering the causes of concern identified in our letter to the service of 10 January 2019. The action plan has deadlines and action owners. The actions seek to develop a greater understanding of the problems with backlogs and delays in HSVs and fire safety audits. They also identify activities to make improvements. Each activity has been assessed for achievability, funding and resources and given a rating.
7. Due to staffing changes within the service's senior leadership team, the chief fire officer has personally taken the senior responsible officer role for the improvements required in prevention and protection. This is a short-term measure but demonstrates the importance he is attaching to making the necessary improvements. That said, the service's senior leadership capacity is a problem. In our view, it appears to be limiting the amount of scrutiny of some of the changes being introduced.
8. At the time of our re-visit the service had not requested any additional resources to support the implementation of activity in its action plan. We recognise that the fire authority has put on hold the proposed £400,000 efficiency savings that were being

sought from the service's prevention activities, and that this may have further adversely affected the service's prevention work. The service may wish to consider if it could identify extra resource in the short term to accelerate activities required to address the backlogs in HSVs and fire safety audits, while it develops more sustainable longer-term plans.

9. The service is planning to request peer support through the National Fire Chiefs Council to further support this work. We recognise the value of this and encourage the service to do this as soon as possible.

Objective 1

Develop and implement a revised process for the management of home safety visits (HSV), specifically those deemed 'high risk' and referred to WSFRS by external partners. The new process will consider existing backlogs, and anticipated future demand, and match resources to satisfy these.

10. We found the service had completed an assessment of outstanding HSVs. As at 31 January 2019, it had identified 696 outstanding high-risk cases dating back to mid-2017. When we visited on 25 February 2019 this had been reduced to 393.
11. We found that an interim process had been introduced to improve the management of HSVs, removing reliance on the service's IT system. It is pleasing to see that most recently-closed cases had been resolved through a visit and assessment by a member of the fire service's staff. However, we are concerned that some cases had been closed following the service being unable to contact the member of the public. This may mean that it has not seen some residents in West Sussex who may be vulnerable to fire.
12. We found this work was still not prioritised, with many of the longest outstanding high-risk cases unactioned. Senior leaders had recently been made aware of this and were seeking to address it. We found a lack of management scrutiny and assurance of the interim process. We also found that decisions to close some cases weren't made in line with the service's policy and expectations.
13. We found continued delays in the referral process into the service from partner organisations. The service receives a large number at fortnightly and monthly intervals. This affects the timeliness of visits. Also, the service's allocation process doesn't take into consideration crews' availability, which can result in further delays. The service is aware it needs to improve its allocation process and resource management. Although it hopes this will be supported by a new IT programme, this is some way off. The service needs to consider how it could improve this process in the short term to make it more effective and based on risk.

Objective 2

Develop and implement a revised process for the management of the service's risk-based inspection programme (protection) to ensure 'high risk' premises are targeted as a priority, and ensure that staffing and resources meet current and future demand.

14. We welcome that the service has re-aligned the methodology for its RBIP based on nationally recognised guidance. This includes better understanding of risk and a clearer expectation on the frequency of when premises should be audited. We recognise that the service is now better prioritising its inspection activity using this new risk definition.
15. Capacity is still a problem. We know the service is considering how to increase resources in the longer term to support the extra activity required. We believe this remains a risk for the service. We encourage it to consider all options to support activity in the short term to address outstanding risk-based inspections, including involving the wider service.
16. The proposed new ICT system should assist in the management of audit and inspection activities.

Objective 3

Implement a robust and proven IT solution to meet the requirements of prevention and protection activities across WSFRS.

17. In our initial inspection, we found the service's IT system creates problems. We recognise the commitment from the service and fire authority to source a replacement which is being managed as part of the service's fire control programme. We welcome the funded and approved business case with programme management structures, disciplines and resources to manage the implementation. We hope a new system can be implemented as soon as is practicable.
18. We do not underestimate the complications and resource implications of implementing a new IT system, nor the challenges of migrating a lot of information from the old system. However, this is important. While it will require resource, it should result in long-term improvements in both effectiveness and efficiency.

Outcome

19. The prevention and protection issues we found in West Sussex are serious. They create a real risk that those who are vulnerable to fire are not getting the support they need. They also mean that public buildings aren't being appropriately audited to ensure compliance with fire safety regulations. Since our inspection we recognise the focus the service places on remedying these issues. We welcome your detailed action plan with tangible outcomes and action owners. We found appropriate governance structures within the service, and the fire authority can now scrutinise the service in this area more fully.
20. Despite clear progress, we would like to see quicker action in relation to dealing with the backlogs of HSVs and risk-based fire safety audits. Though we recognise the focus on providing long-term and sustainable improvements, the service should also address the current risks. We encourage the service to consider what more it can do in the short term.
21. We will revisit West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service in September 2019 to make sure the action plan is being progressed, and that service to the public of West Sussex has improved.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dru Sharpling', with a stylized, cursive script.

Dru Sharpling

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