

Chris Strickland
Chief Fire Officer
Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor Kevin Reynolds
Chair
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Fire Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Strickland and Cllr Reynolds,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: CAMBRIDGESHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

In August 2020, we were commissioned by the Home Secretary to inspect how fire and rescue services in England are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. This letter sets out our assessment of the effectiveness of your service's response to the pandemic.

2. The pandemic is a global event that has affected everyone and every organisation. Fire and rescue services have had to continue to provide a service to the public and, like every other public service, have had to do so within the restrictions imposed.

3. For this inspection, we were asked by the Home Secretary to consider what is working well and what is being learned; how the fire sector is responding to the COVID-19 crisis; how fire services are dealing with the problems they face; and what changes are likely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. We recognise that the pandemic is not over and as such this inspection concerns the service's initial response.

4. I am grateful for the positive and constructive way your service engaged with our inspection. I am also very grateful to your service for the positive contribution you have made to your community during the pandemic. We inspected your service between 5 and 16 October 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

5. In relation to your service, Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service declared a major incident on 20 March 2020.

6. In summary, we were impressed with how the service adapted and responded to the pandemic effectively, and how they put the health and wellbeing of their people at the forefront of decision-making. The service maintained its statutory functions of prevention, protection

and response while providing additional support to the community during the first phase of the pandemic. It used its wholetime firefighters to respond to emergencies, and used the increased availability of its on-call workforce to provide extra support, especially to its local ambulance trust. This meant the people of Cambridgeshire were better supported through the pandemic.

7. Firefighters helped out with driving ambulances, training staff to drive ambulances, face fitting masks to be used by frontline NHS and clinical care staff working with COVID-19 patients, and welfare visits to the vulnerable who were shielding. Resources were well managed, and the service's financial position was largely unaffected. 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.

8. The service communicated well with its staff throughout the pandemic, including on issues relating to wellbeing. A notable achievement is the extra wellbeing services put in place for its workforce who are at higher risk from COVID-19, including its black, Asian and minority ethnic staff and those with underlying health conditions. It also made sure all staff had the resources they needed to do their jobs effectively, providing infection control kits, extra information and technology, and putting in place additional flexible working arrangements.

9. 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, Cambridgeshire FRS 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 make sure wholetime firefighters are fully productive, while minimising the risk of them contracting or spreading the virus.

(c) 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

10. 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.

11. 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.

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

13. The plans now include further detail on what elements of the service should maintain response function 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, and supply of personal protective equipment (PPE).

Fulfilling statutory functions

14. 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.

15. 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 has attended emergencies. It has also continued to visit the most vulnerable people who are at the greatest risk of fire in the community and the highest-risk premises.

Response

16. 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.

17. The overall availability of fire engines was better during the pandemic than it was during the same period last year. Between 1 April and 30 June 2020, the service's average overall fire engine availability was 82.8 percent compared with 65.5 percent during the same period in 2019. While this increase is welcome, it is below the England average for the same period. We were told that this increase was in part because more on-call firefighters were available to respond to emergencies because of being furloughed or working from home in their primary employment.

18. The service temporarily introduced different crewing models as a result of the pandemic. These included reducing the size of a wholetime fire engine crew from five to four, or where possible, crews were split and used additional vehicles to maintain social distancing to minimise the spread of the virus. It also stopped using its roaming fire engines, which it normally deploys around the county dependent on risk.

19. The service told us that its average response time to fires improved during the pandemic compared with the same period in 2019. This was for several reasons, including 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.

20. The service had good arrangements in place to make sure that its control room was able to keep working effectively during the pandemic. For example, it expanded the number of staff who could support control in various ways, including training staff from elsewhere in the service, and streamlining its recruit control training course.

Prevention

21. 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.
22. The service conducted fewer safe and well visits than it normally would. It reviewed which individuals and groups it considered to be at an increased risk from fire due to the pandemic, and continued to target those at increased risk and provide safe and well visits by dedicated community safety officers.
23. Where it undertook face-to-face safe and well visits to those considered at highest risk from fire, it provided its staff suitable PPE.

Protection

24. The NFCC issued guidance on how to continue protection activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes maintaining a risk-based approach, completing desktop audits and issuing enforcement notices electronically. Activity included carrying out audits on those premises that are at the greatest risk from fire. The service broadly adopted this guidance.
25. The service didn't amend its definition of what constitutes a high-risk premises during the pandemic. Risk is determined by many factors, and so services should keep this under review. But it did complete an impact analysis, recognising that the risk to the public from fire can increase as businesses and other premises change their working environment in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
26. The service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it normally would. It decided to continue face-to-face fire safety activities on a risk-assessed basis and gave staff suitable PPE.
27. The service continued to respond to complaints and statutory building control consultations, and continued to issue alteration, enforcement and prohibition notices.
28. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as using telephone and email to make the initial contact, completing COVID-19 risk assessments, conducting desktop assessments, and reducing the number of staff on visits.
29. The service has continued to engage with those responsible for fire safety in high-risk premises that have cladding similar to that at Grenfell Tower, in particular, premises that have temporary evacuation procedures in place.

Staff health and safety and wellbeing

30. 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.

31. 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 individual support through occupational health, counselling, peer support, and access to external resources such as a daily single point of contact for wellbeing issues, provided by Cambridgeshire Constabulary. The service has discussed with its staff and taken feedback via staff reflection surveys on how it should plan for the potential long-term effects of COVID-19 on its workforce.

32. 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. It made available an online personal risk calculator (Polbridge Occupational Health), which assesses vulnerability to serious illness. Those assessed as high or very high risk had the necessary safeguards put in place, such as modified duties including remote or home working.

33. 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.

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.

35. The service provided its workforce with appropriate PPE in a timely manner. It participated in the national fire sector scheme to procure PPE, which allowed it to achieve value for money.

Staff absence

36. Absences have increased compared with the same period in 2019. The service told us that the number of days lost due to sickness absence between 1 April and 30 June 2020 increased by 31 percent compared with the same period in 2019.

37. The service updated the way it deals with staff absences to help it 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, guidance for managers and bereavement. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

Staff engagement

38. 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 updates on intranet, emails, Workplace by Facebook, telephone and welfare letters from the chief fire officer about wellbeing and health and safety.

39. The service intends to maintain changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19, including the reduced number of staff working in headquarters, flexible and home working, changes to the training of control recruits, and the use of webinars as part of its usual processes.

Working with others, and making changes locally

40. To protect communities, fire and rescue 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: driving ambulances, ambulance driver training, assisting vulnerable people, and face fitting of masks to be used by frontline NHS and clinical care staff.

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 specifies what new roles firefighters could provide during the pandemic. Each service then consulted locally on the specific work it had been asked to support, to agree how to address any health and safety requirements including risk assessments. If public sector partners requested further support outside the tripartite agreement, the specifics would need to be agreed nationally before the work could begin.

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

44. Other unions were engaged, including UNISON if their members were asked to do extra work, even if it was covered by the tripartite agreement.

45. Most 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.

46. There were extra requests for work by partner agencies that initially fell outside the tripartite agreement, including welfare visits to the vulnerable. Unfortunately, this couldn't be agreed with the National FBU in time, but the service undertook the visits using its on-call and professional support staff on a voluntary basis. As a result, the community didn't have to wait before this support was provided.

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

48. 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

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 local resilience forum (LRF). Cambridgeshire FRS is member of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough 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. The service's chief fire officer is the chair of the LRF. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the service also chaired the communications group. It was a member of the strategic co-ordinating group, tactical co-ordinating group, PPE distribution group, communities and vulnerable group and a multi-agency intelligence centre. 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. Between 1 March and 31 July 2020 its main extra costs were £362,000 for PPE and £104,000 for cleaning and decontamination supplies. It doesn't yet fully understand the effect this will have on its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings, but is working with district councils to forecast a potential deficit in its precept as a result of COVID-19.

54. The service received £748,000 of extra government funding to support its response. Between 1 March and 31 July 2020, it spent £608,000 on PPE, additional IT, and enhanced cleaning and decontamination supplies. It used this income efficiently, and it mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period.

55. The service didn't use any of its reserves to meet the extra costs that arose during this period.

56. When used, overtime was managed appropriately. The service made sure that its staff who worked overtime had enough rest between shifts.

Ways of working

57. The service has changed how it operates during the pandemic. For example, it has increased remote and flexible working arrangements and virtual communication platforms including Zoom and Microsoft Teams. It had the necessary IT to support remote working where appropriate. Where new IT was needed, it made sure that the procurement processes achieved good value for money.

58. 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.

59. The senior leaders have had positive feedback from staff on how they were engaged with during the pandemic. As a result, the service plans to adopt these changes in its usual procedures

and consider how they can be developed further to help promote a sustainable change to its working culture.

60. 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

61. 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.

62. 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.

63. For most of the pandemic, the main role for wholetime firefighters was to provide the service's core functions. We expect services to keep their processes under review to make sure they use their wholetime workforces as productively as possible.

64. The on-call workforce took on extra responsibilities covering most of the roles agreed as part of the tripartite agreement and other extra responsibilities.

65. As part of its workforce planning, the service re-engaged a retired member of staff to help fill in where required in non-operational roles, and used professional support staff to support its additional activities. Appropriate training was provided.

Governance of the service's response

66. 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 the budget is spent wisely.

67. Members of the fire and rescue authority and the service maintained a constructive relationship.

68. Members of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Fire and Rescue Authority 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.

69. The service regularly updated members of 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.

70. Arrangements were put in place to give fire and rescue authority members relevant and regular information about how the service responded to the pandemic. It made use of technology and held meetings virtually.

71. During the pandemic, the fire and rescue authority continued to give the service proportionate oversight and scrutiny, including of its decision-making process. It did this by regular communication with the chief fire officer and receiving the service's written briefings.

Looking to the future

72. 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.

73. Cambridgeshire FRS is currently reviewing lessons learned to inform ways of working for the future. Good practices and lessons learned are shared with other services through several routes. These include secondment agreements for driving ambulances, risk assessments and safety measures to return staff to face-to-face prevention and protection activities. They also include regular information exchanges via the NFCC and regular regional meetings. The service has improved its relationships with the police and the ambulance service and is looking to build on its collaborations in the region.

74. The service has identified and is using virtual communication platforms to improve prevention and protection safety messaging and the training of staff. Cambridgeshire FRS has undertaken several staff reflection surveys to determine how its staff feel the service is supporting them through COVID-19.

Next steps

75. This letter will be published on our website. We propose restarting our second round of effectiveness and efficiency fire and rescue inspections in spring 2021, when we will follow up on our findings.

Yours sincerely,



Zoë Billingham

Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary