

Callum Faint
Chief Fire Officer
Leicestershire Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor Nicholas Rushton
Chair
Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland Fire and Rescue Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Faint and Cllr Rushton,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: LEICESTERSHIRE 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 26 October and 6 November 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

5. In relation to your service, the Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland strategic co-ordination group declared a major incident on 24 March 2020.

6. In summary, the service maintained its response, prevention and protection statutory duties. It worked proactively to provide additional support to partners and the community in the initial stages of the pandemic.

7. Fire and rescue service staff, including firefighters, took on several additional roles to support the needs of their local communities. For example, station and control room staff assembled over 5,250 face shields, which were then distributed throughout the county to hospitals, care homes and surgeries.

8. On behalf of its local resilience forum (LRF), the service took responsibility for being the single point of contact for sourcing and organising keyworker accommodation. Over 300 nights of accommodation were provided for keyworkers across Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland.

9. The service communicated well with its staff throughout the pandemic, introducing new virtual ways of communicating, including video logs and virtual tea breaks. The service increased wellbeing support for staff, including weekly updates via its Service Matters e-bulletin, a health and wellbeing support pack, and individual risk assessments.

10. The service was well prepared for the pandemic, because it had already put provisions in place for effective home working. When the pandemic started, it provided extra IT and introduced new flexible working arrangements.

11. Compared with other areas of England, parts of the service's area have faced more serious continuing restrictions since lockdown began in March. This has affected both the service and its staff.

12. We recognise that the arrangements for managing the pandemic may carry on for some time, and that the service is now planning for the future. To be as efficient and effective as possible, Leicestershire 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 evaluate how effective all 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

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

14. 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.

15. The service has reviewed its pandemic flu plan to reflect the changing situation and what it has learned during the pandemic.

16. The service's degradation procedure, which was in place prior to the pandemic, includes detail on how the service could maintain its response capability if staff absence is greater than normal. Its pandemic plans now cover social distancing, making premises 'COVID secure', remote working, mutual aid, supply of personal protective equipment (PPE), health screening, training, communication and risk assessments.

Fulfilling statutory functions

17. The main functions of a fire and rescue service are fire safety, firefighting, fire prevention, rescuing people in road traffic collisions, and responding to emergencies.

18. 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 to emergencies. It has also continued to use social media to share fire safety messages, and has delivered food and medicines to vulnerable members of the community.

Response

19. The service told us it attended fewer incidents between 1 April and 30 June 2020 than it did during the same period in 2019.

20. The overall availability of fire engines was better during the pandemic than it was during the same period in 2019. Between 1 April and 30 June 2020, the service's average overall fire engine availability was 90.1 percent compared with 80.9 percent during the same period in 2019. We were told that this was as a result of lower sickness levels and an increased number of on-call firefighters being available to respond to emergencies as a result of being furloughed or terminated from their primary employment.

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

22. The service told us that its average response time to fires improved during the pandemic compared with the same period in 2019. This was due to several reasons, including lower sickness levels, better fire engine availability and less road traffic during this period. This may not be reflected in [official data recently published by the Home Office](#), because services don't all collect and calculate their data the same way.

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

24. This included effective resilience arrangements, such as further training staff with previous control experience, training managers to undertake extra tasks, collaborating with other services, adapting ways of working, and ensuring the environment was COVID-19-compliant.

Prevention

25. The NFCC issued guidance outlining how services should take a risk-based approach to continuing prevention activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. The service adopted this guidance.

26. The service conducted fewer home fire safety checks than it would normally undertake. It didn't review which individuals and groups it considered to be at an increased risk from fire as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

27. The service decided to continue offering face-to-face home fire safety checks on a risk-assessed basis because it could give staff suitable PPE.

28. The service introduced the option of a home fire safety check by telephone instead of face-to-face. It also trialled and evaluated other options, including undertaking home fire safety checks from the doorstep.

Protection

29. 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 adopted this guidance.

30. In the early stages of the pandemic, the service didn't review how it defines premises as high risk. Instead, it decided to wait until its pre-planned review in June 2020 to do this.

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

32. The service continued with ongoing enforcement activity but didn't need to issue any alteration notices, enforcement notices or prohibition notices. It did continue responding to statutory building control consultations.

33. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as using telephone and email to make the initial contact, completing more desktop assessments, sending and receiving still images electronically, using electronic documents to replace hard-copy letters, reducing the number of staff carrying out visits, maintaining 'COVID secure' measures, and adjusting visits to minimise contact.

34. The service has continued to engage with those responsible for fire safety in high-risk premises with cladding similar to that at Grenfell Tower, in particular, premises where temporary evacuation procedures are in place. However, the service experienced some difficulties in contacting responsible persons due to lockdown restrictions in place in Leicester City and surrounding areas.

35. A convalescence centre was located in the service area. The service worked with the building's responsible person to put in place suitable and reasonable fire safety measures.

Staff health and safety and wellbeing

36. Staff wellbeing was a clear focus for the service during the pandemic. Senior leaders actively promoted wellbeing services and encouraged staff to discuss any worries they had. However, more could have been done earlier to talk to staff about their needs so that the right support could be put in place.

37. 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 a health and wellbeing support pack, occupational health, counselling, peer support, mental health first aid, domestic violence support, and access to external resources such as a chaplaincy and a 24-hour helpline.

38. More structure could have been put in place at an earlier stage to identify and address the specific needs of staff members most at risk from COVID-19, including those from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background and those with underlying health problems. The service developed and implemented processes working with staff to manage the risk. An individual risk assessment in the form of a 'health and wellbeing passport' was introduced on 26 June 2020. This includes any agreed alterations to working arrangements that are put in place to support a staff member's individual needs. At the time of the inspection, the service told us that it had completed this assessment with just over half its staff.

39. 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.

40. 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.

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

42. The service provided its workforce with suitable PPE on time and made sure it achieved value for money. But it had limited participation in the national fire sector scheme to procure PPE as, at the time of the inspection, it believed its own arrangements were cheaper.

Staff absence

43. Absences have decreased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of shifts lost due to sickness absence between 1 April and 30 June 2020 decreased by 7.2 percent compared with the same period in 2019.

44. The service updated its absence procedures so that it could better manage staff wellbeing and health and safety, and make more effective decisions about how to allocate work.

This included information about recording absences, self-isolation and testing. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

Staff engagement

45. Most staff survey respondents told us that the service did provide regular and relevant communication to all staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included regular virtual team meetings, written correspondence, one-to-ones with a manager, and video logs with staff about wellbeing and health and safety.

46. Most on-call firefighter survey respondents told us that they received the same amount of communication as usual during the pandemic. The service made use of telephone, email, virtual meeting platforms, video logs, its intranet and Service Matters e-bulletin when communicating with on-call staff during COVID-19.

47. The service intends to maintain changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19, including virtual ways of communicating.

Working with others, and making changes locally

48. To protect communities, fire and rescue service staff were encouraged to carry out extra roles beyond their core duties. This was to support other local blue light services and other public service providers that were experiencing high levels of demand, and to offer other support to its communities.

49. The service carried out the following new activities: assisting vulnerable people; face fitting for masks; delivering PPE; ambulance transport; assembling and delivering face shields; delivering food; delivering prescription medicines; delivering controlled drugs; sourcing and arranging keyworker accommodation; COVID-19 testing; COVID-19 compliance checks; and supporting Leicester City Council with waste referrals.

50. 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.

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

52. Other unions were engaged, including UNISON, if their members were asked to do extra work, including under the tripartite agreement.

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

54. There were extra requests for work by partner agencies that fell outside the tripartite agreement, including COVID-19 testing. In addition, the service obtained local agreement with the FBU to ensure COVID-19 compliance measures were in place within business premises on behalf of Leicester City Council. For example, providing advice to hotels and boarding houses to ensure they were complying with COVID-19 regulations.

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

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

Local resilience forum

57. 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. Leicestershire Fire and Rescue Service is a member of Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland's LRF.

58. 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 fully engage in the multi-agency response.

59. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the service chaired a 'blue light cell' which supported the LRF's overall strategy to manage COVID-19. In addition, it was a member of the following operational cells: strategic co-ordinating group, tactical co-ordinating group, logistics cell (supporting the delivery and distribution of PPE), and the communications cell. The service was able to allocate suitable qualified staff to participate in these groups without affecting its core duties.

Use of resources

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

61. The service has made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. At the time of our inspection, its main extra costs were £112,000 staffing costs, £64,000 technology, £51,000 PPE, and £27,000 cleaning and decontamination supplies. 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.

62. The service received £986,000 of extra government funding to support its response. At the time of our inspection, it had spent £289,000 of this money on staffing costs, technology, PPE, and cleaning, decontamination and ancillary supplies. The remaining money has been set aside to cover future costs incurred by the pandemic and future income shortfalls. It has shown how it used this income efficiently, and that it mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period.

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

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

Ways of working

65. The service changed how it operates during the pandemic. For example, it put in place a blended approach to home working, meetings and training. It had the necessary IT to support remote working where appropriate. Where new IT was needed, it made sure that procurement processes achieved good value for money.

66. 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.

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

68. 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

69. 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.

70. Arrangements put in place to monitor staff performance across the service were effective. This meant the service could be sure its staff were making the best contribution that they reasonably could during this period. Extra capacity was identified and reassigned to support other areas of the service and other organisations.

71. As well as performing their statutory functions, wholetime firefighters volunteered for extra activities, including those under the tripartite agreement.

72. The on-call workforce took on extra responsibilities covering some of the roles agreed as part of the tripartite agreement, the shifts of absent wholetime staff, and other responsibilities.

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, namely to set the service's priorities and budget and make sure that the budget is spent wisely.

74. During the pandemic, members of the fire and rescue authority were kept informed of decisions the service made in order to discharge its statutory functions. The service regularly updated them 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. Members maintained regular communication with the chief fire officer and received the service's written briefings.

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

Looking to the future

76. 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.

77. Leicestershire Fire and Rescue Service has improved its collaboration with partners. It is looking at ways it can maintain positive links and support these organisations in the future. The service transformed its use of technology and aims to employ a blended use of technology and physical attendance for training, assessments, meetings and general communication. It will continue developing the use of virtual reality for training. It's also reviewing the benefits of remote working and hopes to retain some working from home, with some time spent in the office, so that staff still feel connected and supported. The service intends to finish developing departmental business plans, and remains a part of the NFCC business continuity group.

78. Good practice and what worked was shared with other services locally through the LRF, regionally through established forums, and nationally through the NFCC. The chief fire officer participates in a weekly call between regional senior officers, including East Midlands Ambulance Service NHS Trust. This enabled the senior leaders of those organisations to compare some of the issues being experienced. Leicestershire Fire and Rescue Service shared its experience of local lockdown with regional senior officers. It also contributed to Dame Mary Ney's report, *Rapid Stocktake of Lessons Learnt and Good Practice in the Management of Local COVID-19 Outbreaks*. The service worked with its supplier of breathing apparatus to find an alternative wash for its masks, as supply of the original wash was disrupted by the pandemic. This information was shared with other services.

Next steps

79. 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,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Zoë Billingham". The signature is written in black ink on a light-colored, textured background.**Zoë Billingham**

Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary