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

Rebecca Bryant
Chief Fire Officer
Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service

Matthew Ellis
Staffordshire Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner

22 January 2021

Dear Ms Bryant and Commissioner Ellis,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: STAFFORDSHIRE 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 19 and 30 October 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

5. In relation to your service, the local resilience forum (LRF) declared a major incident on 24 March 2020.

6. In summary, the service adapted and responded to the pandemic effectively, continuing to provide its statutory functions. We were particularly impressed with the service's preparations for the pandemic, especially that it had anticipated many of the pandemic's impacts and had put measures in place to mitigate them.

7. It gave additional support to the community during the first phase of the pandemic. It used its wholetime firefighters to respond to emergencies, support vulnerable people in the community and help partner agencies. The increased availability of its on-call workforce helped the service to continue to be able to respond to emergencies. Non-operational staff also contributed to the work agreed under the tripartite agreement (see paragraph 44). This meant the people of Staffordshire were well supported through the pandemic.

8. Resources were well managed, and the service's financial position was largely unaffected, especially as it didn't have to use reserves to cover extra costs. The service was able to respond quickly to staff absences; it made sure that people were in the right place so that it could continue to respond to emergencies. The service communicated well with its staff throughout the pandemic, including on issues relating to staff wellbeing. The work it has done to make sure its workforce is inclusive meant that all staff, including those who are at higher risk of COVID-19, were supported during the pandemic. A notable achievement is the work the service did with the Midlands Partnership Health Trust to give mental health support to staff.

9. The service also made sure all staff had the resources they needed to do their jobs effectively. This included providing extra IT and putting in place new flexible working arrangements. The service is considering how to support its on-call workforce more effectively to further build workforce resilience. It is also reviewing its flexible working policy.

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, Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service should focus on the following area:

(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.

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. The service developed a COVID-19 specific business continuity plan in February 2020 so that it could better manage its response to the pandemic.

12. The plans were enough to enable the service to anticipate and mitigate the risks presented by Covid-19, including maintaining an appropriate level of fire cover and protecting its staff.

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

14. The service put in place action cards for each department/function, which included checking stock levels of personal protective equipment (PPE) and advising staff on the COVID-19 testing arrangements. These cards enabled staff to easily understand what actions they needed

to take to make sure the service could quickly respond to the changing circumstances of the pandemic.

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. It has also prioritised its support for those most vulnerable in the community, and carried out safe and well visits. It has also continued to talk to and work with local businesses to make sure they complied with fire safety regulations. It has carried out telephone and desktop reviews to assess the risks of businesses. And it has continued with its Safe and Sound schools education programme by moving it completely online.

Response

17. The service told us that between 1 April and 30 June 2020 it attended broadly the same number of incidents as it did during the same period in 2019.

18. 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 89.0 percent compared with 77.9 percent during the same period in 2019. This was because the service could deploy staff on overtime to avoid crewing absences. Also, there was an increased number of on-call firefighters available to respond to emergencies because of being furloughed from their primary employment. The service introduced different working arrangements as a temporary measure during this period. They included minimising the numbers of staff on duty to reduce contact. The service monitored all of this daily.

19. 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 the service being able to fill any staffing gaps to make sure it maintained its fire engine availability. 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 had enough staff during the pandemic.

21. West Midlands Fire Service provides the control function for Staffordshire FRS. The services have agreed a common way of working. A joint operations board regularly monitors the performance of the control room. In addition to the resilience arrangements that West Midlands Fire and Rescue Service had in place, the service could offer casual contracts to trained staff who

used to work in the control room. However, these weren't needed. It also has additional staff who are trained in the control room technology and can help to support resilience if needed.

Prevention

22. 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.

23. The service conducted fewer safe and well visits than it would normally undertake. It reviewed which individuals and groups it considered to be at an increased risk from fire as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The service found that those individuals who were vulnerable and/or 'shielding' weren't at increased risk from fire.

24. The service decided to continue offering face-to-face home fire safety checks for people at very high risk of fire and it was able to give staff suitable PPE to carry out this activity.

25. The service introduced the option of a safe and well visit by telephone instead of face-to-face safe and well visits. Where staff continued to visit, it also introduced other options. These included staff spending less time in the person's home, and asking people to stay in a different room. The service also made calls before visits, to check if people had symptoms of COVID-19. The service also carried out its Safe and Sound schools education programme online.

Protection

26. The NFCC has 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 adopted this guidance.

27. The service reviewed how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic. As a result, it found that, in general, the risk from fire reduced while business premises were empty. But businesses such as bed and breakfasts that were housing homeless people were at higher risk from fire. The re-opening of offices with new COVID-secure restrictions in place (such as one-way systems) also presented a potential fire risk. This was because people may be guided away from escape routes. The service therefore advised businesses to make sure they tested their fire alarm and evacuation procedures on re-opening. The service also maintained a high profile on social media as the restrictions eased, particularly with regard to the retail and hospitality sector.

28. The service conducted about the same number of fire safety audits as it would normally undertake. It decided to stop most face-to-face fire safety audits except where there was a significant risk. 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.

29. The service continued to issue alteration notices, enforcement notices and prohibition notices. It also continued responding to statutory building control consultations.

30. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as focusing mainly on those businesses that changed the use of their premises. It carried out telephone and desktop reviews for regulated premises. It also continued with its community sprinkler project.

Staff health and safety and wellbeing

31. 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.

32. 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, an employee assistance programme, and signposting the Fire Fighters Charity. Also, the service worked with the Midland Partnership Health Trust to set up a bespoke mental health service for staff. This meant that people could quickly access support for their mental health. The service is also working with two clinical psychologists to further explore work to support mental health wellbeing.

33. Staff most at risk of COVID-19 were identified effectively, including those from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background and those with underlying health problems. The service had already developed and implemented processes, working with staff to manage the risk of them contracting the virus. Before the pandemic, the service had already acted to remove barriers to inclusion in the workplace so that staff feel they can raise issues or concerns easily. Most staff who were more at risk of COVID-19 told us that they felt the service had communicated with them about their needs.

34. Wellbeing best practice was also shared with other services through the NFCC. The service has discussed with its staff how it should plan for the potential longer-term effects of COVID-19 on its workforce. The work that it is doing with the Midland Partnership Health Trust supports this.

35. 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, although it had temporarily suspended fitness testing for the first few weeks of the pandemic.

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

37. The service provided its workforce with suitable PPE on time. It participated in the national fire sector scheme to procure PPE, as well as procuring PPE through Staffordshire Police's arrangements, which allowed it to achieve value for money.

Staff absence

38. Absences have increased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of days/shifts lost due to sickness absence between 1 April and 30 June 2020 increased by 63.1 percent compared with the same period in 2019.

39. The service updated the 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 sickness absence reporting; self-isolation; and procedures relating to COVID-19 testing and quarantine. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

Staff engagement

40. Most staff survey respondents told us that the service provided regular and relevant communication to all staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. The service set up workplace chat groups to replicate the office environment virtually. Through this system, staff could easily connect with colleagues, and managers could allocate work and monitor performance. This meant that staff who were working from home didn't feel isolated. Senior managers also communicated with teams using virtual platforms. The service regularly monitored the effectiveness of its communication with staff. And it adapted to make sure the level of communication was actually needed and relevant, and made a difference to staff.

41. Because of changes to the service's ways of working in response to COVID-19, it is reviewing its flexible working policy to include more options for homeworking where the role allows and where this would support staff wellbeing.

Working with others, and making changes locally

42. 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.

43. The service carried out the following new activities: packing/repacking food for, and helping, vulnerable people; delivering PPE; and antigen testing.

44. 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 specified what new roles firefighters could agree to engage in during the pandemic. Each service then undertook local consultations 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 from services with additional roles that were outside the tripartite agreement, the specifics would need to be agreed nationally before the work could begin.

45. The service consulted locally to implement the tripartite agreement with the FBU, the Fire Officers Association, and the Fire and Rescue Service Association.
46. Other unions were engaged, including UNISON, as their members were asked to do extra work, including under the tripartite agreement.
47. 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.
48. There were extra requests for work by partner agencies that fell outside the tripartite agreement, including supporting the LRF with mortality management; making welfare calls to see that people who were shielding and/or vulnerable had enough food and medicines; and supporting the local authority in setting up additional testing sites.
49. This work was agreed and undertaken on time and in line with the request from the partner agency. Wholtime firefighters and non-operational staff carried out this work.
50. All new work, including that done under the tripartite agreement, was risk-assessed and complied with the health and safety requirements.
51. All activities to support other organisations during this period were monitored and reviewed through the service's debrief procedures. The service has identified that it wants to continue work with partners to share data through the LRF, so that it can target its prevention and protection work better.

Local resilience forum

52. 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. Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service is a member of Staffordshire LRF.
53. 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.
54. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the service chaired the mutual aid and resources group. It co-chaired the vulnerability and voluntary sector group. It was a member of the following groups: mortality management; health and social care; communications; compliance and enforcement; and restoration. The service was able to allocate suitably qualified staff to participate in these groups without affecting its core duties.

Use of resources

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

56. The service has made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. The service received approximately £1m of extra government funding to support its response. At the time of our inspection, its main extra costs were related to PPE and cleaning materials (£40,000), and the costs of staff carrying out the additional activities (£112,000). It also lost income in relation to the temporary suspension of the Prince's Trust programme. It fully understands the effect this will have on its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings. It has shown how it used this income efficiently, and that it mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period. Where possible, it has exploited opportunities to make savings during this period and used them to mitigate any financial risks it has identified.

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

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

Ways of working

59. The service changed the way in which it operates during the pandemic. For example, it quickly put in place homeworking arrangements for staff where appropriate. It had already tested that the arrangements would work beforehand. 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.

60. 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. This includes supporting the wellbeing of staff.

61. The service has plans in place for its on-call firefighters. They include forming a small, dedicated support team to provide more resilience, as well as better management and training support.

62. 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

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

64. Monitoring arrangements were put in place to ensure resources were in the right place at the right time across the service, and that they were effective. This meant the service could meet its statutory responsibilities during this period. Extra capacity was identified and reassigned to support other areas of the service and other organisations.

65. As well as performing their statutory functions, wholetime firefighters carried out extra activities, such as urgent out-of-hours and targeted safe and well checks, and those activities under the tripartite agreement. They also distributed PPE to other agencies from their stations. The service is also using wholetime stations for antibody testing.

66. The on-call workforce responded to incidents, and covered the shifts of absent wholetime staff. They also covered some of the roles agreed as part of the tripartite agreement.

67. As part of its workforce planning, the service was prepared to re-engage former members of staff to provide resilience in the shared control room. But these staff were ultimately not needed.

68. The service gave appropriate consideration to making sure the staff it planned to re-engage were operationally competent for the work they would be asked to do.

Governance of the service's response

69. 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.

70. The Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (PFCC) for Staffordshire and his chief executive 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. The service regularly updated the PFCC about how it was responding to the pandemic, as well as the extra activities of its staff. This included work carried out as part of the tripartite arrangements.

71. During the pandemic, the PFCC continued to give the service proportionate oversight and scrutiny, including of its decision-making process. He did this by regularly communicating with the chief fire officer and receiving the service's written briefings. This included monthly meetings with the PFCC and his chief executive, as well as overseeing some of the more tactical running of the service.

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. Staffordshire FRS found that it could better target vulnerable people for its prevention and protection activity by the sharing of data through the LRF. It wants to continue to work closely with partner organisations on this. The service plans to support its on-call workforce better; it will do this by forming a small, dedicated team to improve resilience, and to give better support for management and training. The improved communication and ways of working during the pandemic

helped remove barriers between different parts of the workforce. The service also transformed its use of technology. It is considering how virtual platforms and remote working can help it become more effective and efficient.

74. Good practice and what worked was shared with other services through the NFCC. This includes the work it has done on its Safe and Sound education programme, which will inform the NFCC's Stay Wise programme, advice regarding the appropriate PPE in relation to face masks, and wellbeing work.

Next steps

75. 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,



Wendy Williams

Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

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