

Wendy Williams

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

Mick Crennell
Chief Fire Officer
Avon Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor Donald Davies
Chair
Avon Fire Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Crennell and Cllr Davies,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: AVON 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, Avon and Somerset Local Resilience Forum (LRF) declared a major incident on 19 March 2020.

6. In summary, we were pleased to see the service continuing to maintain its statutory functions during the pandemic. The service adapted and responded to the pandemic effectively, and gave additional support to the community. It used its wholetime firefighters to respond to

emergencies. And it increased its on-call cover. The service is looking at how to use its on-call workforce more flexibly.

7. Many staff across the service volunteered for extra roles, such as driving ambulances. This meant the people of Avon were better supported through the pandemic.

8. The service responded quickly to the initial phase of the pandemic. It did this by setting up its critical incident management team, which met daily. The service regularly communicated to its staff. And it had positive wellbeing support in place. For example, it offered alternative accommodation to staff who had vulnerable family members shielding at home. In addition, it risk-assessed staff who identified themselves as being more vulnerable.

9. The service needs to make sure that its information technology (IT) is better able to adequately support staff who are working remotely. While the service put some additional measures in place, it needs to do more. We welcome the steps the service is taking to improve its IT infrastructure in the future.

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, Avon 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 determine how it can improve its IT and systems so that staff can effectively work remotely.

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 started to review its plans to reflect the changing situation and what it has learned during the pandemic.

14. The plans now include further information on resilience arrangements for responding to emergencies and the running of its control room. The service will be updating its information about making sure its premises are COVID-19 secure. It will also continue to look at how staff can work remotely and how to ensure it can maintain enough stocks of personal protective equipment (PPE) in future.

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 has continued to attend emergencies. It did this by prioritising activity and working more remotely. It has continued to carry out home fire safety visits to the most vulnerable people in the community. And it has introduced desktop fire safety reviews for high-risk premises.

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 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 97 percent compared with 90 percent during the same period in 2019. We were told that this was the result of lower sickness levels among staff and because more on-call firefighters were available than usual to respond to emergencies and to help with any wholetime crewing shortfalls. This was due to them being furloughed from their primary employment.

19. The service also made use of operational staff who weren't on direct response duties, on an as needed basis, to help with any crewing shortages. The service didn't change its crewing models or shift patterns during this period.

20. 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, such as better fire engine availability, lower sickness levels 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.

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

22. This included effective resilience arrangements, including having an effective control room degradation plan. The service re-engaged former control room staff. It trained additional staff across the organisation. The service also had a process in place with control rooms of neighbouring services. This process involved them exchanging information daily with each other if support was needed.

Prevention

23. 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.

24. The service conducted fewer home fire safety visits than it would normally undertake. The service 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 introduced a prioritisation model to assess a person's vulnerability. As a result, staff carried out face-to-face home fire safety visits to the most vulnerable, on the basis of those risk assessments. The service gave staff suitable PPE for these visits. It continued to receive and respond to partner agency referrals. For home fire safety visits, the service prioritised those people who were at risk from hate crime or domestic violence.

25. The service introduced the option of a home fire safety check by telephone instead of a face-to-face visit. Its community safety workers gave advice and support during the calls. The service made a total of 945 of these telephone calls. Operational staff delivered relevant equipment (such as smoke alarms) to people where this was needed.

Protection

26. 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.

27. The service adapted its protection activities well during the initial stages of the pandemic and continued to provide its statutory functions. It maintained good contact with those responsible for fire safety at its higher-risk premises. Activity included carrying out audits on those premises that are at the greatest risk from fire.

28. The service reviewed how it defines premises as high-risk premises during the pandemic. As a result, it identified care homes as being at an increased risk from fire. So it wrote to all care homes in the county, giving them additional advice. It also sent them a questionnaire, and gave tailored advice based on the responses it received.

29. The service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it would normally undertake. As a result, it introduced desktop fire safety reviews and carried out 612 telephone desktop reviews.

30. The service continued face-to-face fire safety audits. It did them on the basis of risk assessments and gave staff suitable PPE. Where appropriate, 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.

31. The service didn't issue any alterations notices, enforcement notices or prohibition notices during the period of our inspection, but it had the ability to do so. It continued responding to statutory building control consultations.

32. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as using the telephone to follow up with the responsible person progress against existing enforcement notices. The service used its website and social media platforms to promote fire safety awareness and compliance.

33. 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.

34. A Nightingale hospital was opened at the University of West of England site in Bristol. The service worked with the hospital's responsible person to put in place suitable and reasonable fire safety measures. The service also sought advice and support from London Fire Brigade, which had a similar Nightingale hospital in place. The service used the premises to test its emergency response arrangements. It also did an exercise with its operational staff and Nightingale hospital staff.

Staff health and safety and wellbeing

35. The service considered the wellbeing needs of staff. Senior leaders actively promoted wellbeing services. They also encouraged staff to discuss any concerns they had.

36. 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; trauma risk management practitioners; and family liaison officers. Also, the service allocated dedicated welfare officers to all staff who drove ambulances under the tripartite agreement.

37. Staff who were most at risk from COVID-19, including those with underlying health problems, needed to self-identify before the service made reasonable adjustments for them. The service made direct contact with each black, Asian and minority ethnic member of staff to offer additional support. The service worked with staff to develop and implement processes to manage the risks.

It carried out individual risk assessments. And it implemented alternative measures to make sure that staff were adequately protected. This included putting in place arrangements to work from home or to take paid leave. To enable staff to continue to work, the service made available alternative accommodation arrangements such as in its training centre. These arrangements were provided to staff who had vulnerable family members shielding at home for whatever reason.

38. Wellbeing information was also shared with other services across the south-west region. Currently, the service is developing plans to discuss with staff the potential longer-term effects of COVID-19 on its workforce.

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

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

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

Staff absence

42. Absences have decreased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of days/shifts lost due to sickness absence decreased by 20.4 percent between 1 April and 30 June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019.

43. The service gave its staff regular bulletins so that it could better manage staff wellbeing and health and safety, and make more effective decisions about how to allocate work. The bulletins included information about recording absences; testing requirements; annual leave; and details about a bereavement policy. They also gave advice to staff who were travelling from higher risk areas. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

Staff engagement

44. Most staff survey respondents, including its on-call workforce, told us that the service made regular and relevant communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included regular fire bulletins and a frequently asked questions section on its extranet (an external webpage). Staff had to register with the extranet in order to receive regular updates remotely. The service used a number of communication channels, such as a text messaging system that the service uses to send important messages to its workforce. The senior leadership board continued its staff engagement across all groups by using audio teleconferences. The service also used virtual platforms, such as Zoom, to advise staff about wellbeing and health and safety.

45. The service intends to maintain changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19, including some aspects of flexible and remote working.

Working with others, and making changes locally

46. 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.

47. The service carried out the following new activities: driving ambulances in emergencies; taking patients to outpatient appointments or to receive urgent medical care; and training care home staff in relation to infection prevention and control (including training them about hand hygiene, and PPE guidance and procedures). It also supported care home staff who carried out testing. The service trained its own staff so that they were prepared to remove bodies and give administrative support to the coroner. Ultimately, staff didn't need to take these actions.

48. 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.
49. The service obtained support for all activities being undertaken within the scope of the tripartite agreement with the local FBU representative.
50. Other unions were engaged, including UNISON and Unite, if their members were asked to do extra work, including under the tripartite agreement.
51. Most of the new work done by the service under the tripartite agreement was agreed in time for it to start promptly.
52. All new work, including that done under the tripartite agreement, was risk-assessed and complied with the health and safety requirements.
53. Operational staff, and some non-operational staff, carried out all additional roles on a voluntary basis. Where staff worked outside of their core hours, the service paid them at their normal hourly rate. The service took some staff off their normal duties so they could support the South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust (SWASFT).
54. All activities to support other organisations during this period were monitored and reviewed. For example, the service recorded the number of incidents to which it responded. The service hasn't formally identified which activities to continue, but it would like to continue working with its partners such as SWASFT.

Local resilience forum

55. 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. Avon Fire and Rescue Service is a member of Avon and Somerset LRF.
56. The service was an active member of the Avon and Somerset 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. For example, the service made use of Weston-super-Mare fire station to store PPE.
57. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the service chaired the tactical co-ordination group. It was a member of the strategic co-ordination group and had representatives in the following sub-groups: business continuity, death management process, logistics, communications,

PPE and recovery. The service was able to allocate suitably qualified staff to participate in these groups without affecting its core duties.

Use of resources

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

59. The service has made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. The service 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 the financial risks it has identified.

60. The service received just over £1m of extra government funding to support its response. It spent a total of £181,464 in the initial phase of the pandemic. By 30 June 2020, the two main costs were PPE (£105,803) and staffing costs (£46,758). SWASFT funded the ambulance driving on a cost recovery basis. The service has shown how it used this income efficiently, and that it mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period.

61. The service didn't use any of its reserves to meet the extra costs that arose during this period. It will continue to use the remaining government funding to support its response and other projects.

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

Ways of working

63. The service changed how it operates during the pandemic. For example, it developed remote working practices in prevention and protection activities. And it used virtual platforms for meetings.

64. The service's current IT provision isn't able to fully support remote working. Not all staff members can access files and systems from home. This is due to capacity constraints with the service's IT infrastructure. As a temporary fix, the service has introduced time slots. These enable staff to access the IT remotely at specific times of the day. This restriction has impacted the ability of staff to work effectively. The service is taking steps to address this issue.

65. 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 having the required IT infrastructure in place.

66. It will explore ways to use its on-call workforce more. For example, it is considering using fixed-term contracts to cover long-term wholetime firefighter absences.

67. The service made good use of the resources and guidance available from the NFCC to support its workforce planning, and to help with its work under the tripartite agreement.

Staffing

68. 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.

69. Despite challenges with IT, the service put arrangements in place to monitor staff performance. This meant the service could be sure its staff were making the best contribution that they reasonably could during this period. The service reassigned some staff to support other areas of the service and other organisations.

70. For most of the pandemic, the main role for wholetime firefighters was to provide the service's core responsibilities and undertake work under the tripartite agreement. We expect services to keep their processes under review to make sure they use their wholetime workforces as productively as possible.

71. As well as responding to emergencies, the on-call workforce took on extra responsibilities. They did this by adopting some of the roles that were agreed as part of the tripartite agreement (such as ambulance driving). This workforce also covered some of the wholetime crewing shortfalls. The service also used on-call firefighters to manage the PPE storage site at Weston-super-Mare fire station. Non-operational staff also did work under the tripartite agreement.

72. As part of its workforce planning, the service re-engaged retired members of staff to work in the control room. The service trained some other staff members to carry out some control room functions, but ultimately it didn't need to use those staff.

73. 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

74. 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.

75. Members of Avon 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.

76. The fire authority and the service maintained a constructive relationship. The fire authority put arrangements in place to give its members relevant and regular information about how the service responded to the pandemic. The authority made use of technology and held meetings virtually.

77. During the pandemic, the fire authority continued to give the service proportionate oversight and scrutiny, including of its decision-making process. It did this by regularly communicating with the chief fire officer and receiving 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. Collaboration between the service and SWASFT, and partner agencies, has improved during the pandemic. The service is looking at ways its workforce can support these organisations more permanently, especially during periods of high demand.

80. The service recognises the value that on-call firefighters have contributed during the pandemic. It wants to continue to use its on-call workforce differently and more flexibly. It will be reviewing how well it responded to the pandemic, and will add any lessons learned into its business continuity management plans. The service plans to invest and develop its IT infrastructure.

81. The service has considerably increased its communication to all staff. It will continue using the extranet, which enables staff to receive regular updates remotely.

82. The service actively collaborated with other fire and rescue services in the south-west. This included regular meetings between chief fire officers to exchange learning from the pandemic. Services shared good practice and information, including from their experiences of the initial stage of the pandemic. All services evaluated the activities they undertook in the tripartite agreement and the work they carried out in the community. This allowed them to share information on prevention, protection, response activities and staff wellbeing. Those involved in the collaboration produced a case study detailing the activities of each fire and rescue service, and how each one responded to the initial phase of the pandemic.

Next steps

83. 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 blue ink that reads "Wendy Williams". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Wendy Williams

Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary