

**Matt Parr CB**

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

Jason Thelwell  
Chief Fire Officer  
Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor Lesley Clarke OBE  
Chair  
Buckinghamshire Fire Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Thelwell and Cllr Clarke,

**COVID-19 INSPECTION: BUCKINGHAMSHIRE 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 2 and 13 November 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

5. In relation to your service, the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum (LRF) jointly declared a major incident on 19 March 2020.

6. In summary, the service responded well during the pandemic and provided additional support to its community. It used wholetime and on-call firefighters to respond to emergencies.

Staff supported the service's partners, especially the local ambulance trust. This meant the people of Buckinghamshire were well supported through the pandemic.

7. Firefighters drove ambulances, assisted in the delivery of essential items, trained care home staff in infection control, and supported the other two Thames Valley fire and rescue services in the distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE) to frontline workers. The service was able to maintain its response, continue prevention activity and broadly maintained all protection activity. Resources were well managed, and the service's financial position was largely unaffected, especially as reserves weren't needed to cover extra costs. The service effectively managed its low level of staff absences, and ensured the Thames Valley primary and secondary control rooms were effective and 'COVID secure'.

8. The service communicated well with its staff throughout the pandemic and provided guidance and support on wellbeing. Extra wellbeing services were put in place for those at higher risk of COVID-19 including black, Asian and minority ethnic staff. The service also provided coronavirus testing to staff and their families who were showing symptoms of the virus. The service made sure all staff had the resources they needed to do their jobs effectively, including extra IT and new flexible working arrangements. It has continued to collaborate with its partners, and has supported the Thames Valley LRF effectively.

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, Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service should determine how it will adopt the new and innovative ways of working introduced during the pandemic for the longer-term, to secure lasting improvements.

### **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. They 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. The service has reviewed its plans to reflect the changing situation and what it has learnt during the pandemic.

11. The plans now include further detail on what elements of the service should maintain response 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, mutual aid and the supply of PPE. The service monitors what work has stopped, what has been scaled back, what it is doing differently and all the new ways of working that have been introduced.

## **Fulfilling statutory functions**

12. 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 other emergencies.

13. 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 continued to undertake prevention work and carry out 'fire and wellness' visits using a risk-based approach in line with NFCC guidance. It has also continued its protection activity throughout the pandemic.

### *Response*

14. 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.

15. 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 56.8 percent compared with 44.3 percent during the same period in 2019. We were told that this was a result of lower sickness levels and on-call firefighters being available to respond to emergencies due to being furloughed from their primary employment.

16. 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 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.

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

18. This included effective resilience arrangements, such as locking down both primary and secondary emergency control rooms to prevent cross-contamination. The facility also implemented enhanced hygiene measures, and all staff followed guidance on social distancing and cleaning of equipment and furniture.

### *Prevention*

19. The NFCC issued guidance explaining how services should maintain a risk-based approach to continue prevention activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. The service adopted this guidance.

20. The service conducted fewer fire and wellness checks 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. As a result, it maintained those at risk from arson and assessed

health and social care referrals as being at increased risk from fire. The service responded to each high-risk referral and instigated a triage system to identify risk levels by speaking to the resident on the telephone. This led to a face-to-face fire and wellness visit for those at highest risk, for which staff were provided with appropriate PPE.

21. The service continued to offer the option of a fire and wellness check by telephone instead of a face-to-face home fire safety check. It also continued to work jointly with housing associations in high-risk premises.

### *Protection*

22. 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.

23. The service reviewed how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic. As a result, it added care homes, places of education and worship, and hospitals that had changed their way of working due to the pandemic as being at an increased risk from fire. The service engaged with these premises, uploaded guidance and information on the service website and carried out mailshots.

24. The service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it would normally undertake. It decided to continue face-to-face fire safety audits and enforcement work because it was able to 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.

25. The service continued with its enforcement activity and issued enforcement notices and prohibition notices. It also continued responding to statutory building control consultations. The service concluded a prosecution as a result of which a large financial penalty was awarded.

26. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as using telephone and email to make the initial contact, using video conferencing, and using electronic documents to replace hard-copy letters. The service also used social media and its own website to inform the public of fire safety measures.

27. 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.

28. A conference centre used for the repatriation of 150 British citizens was in the service area. The service worked with the building's responsible person to put in place suitable and reasonable fire safety measures. The service liaised with another FRS to understand the provisions required to provide appropriate fire safety measures.

## **Staff health and safety and wellbeing**

29. 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.

30. 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, counselling, peer support, and access to external resources such as mindfulness presentations. The service has discussed with its staff how it should plan for the potential longer-term effects of COVID-19 on its workforce.

31. 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 worked with staff to develop and implement processes to manage the risk, including individual risk assessments. The service made sure that its most vulnerable staff 'shielded', and it adopted flexible ways of working to enable working from home. It also provided COVID-19 testing for all staff members and families who had symptoms.

32. Wellbeing best practice was also shared with other services. The service worked with several fire and rescue services and delivered virtual workshops on positive action and inclusion, trans awareness and LGBTQ+ hate crime. All workshops were recorded and shared with the workforce.

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. It also assessed the risks of new work to make sure its staff had the skills and equipment needed to work safely and effectively.

34. The service provided its workforce with suitable PPE on time. It participated in the national fire sector scheme to procure PPE, which allowed it to achieve value for money.

### *Staff absence*

35. Absences have decreased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of days lost due to sickness absence between 1 April and 30 June 2020 decreased by 17.9 percent compared with the same period in 2019.

36. The service provided additional guidance and information to staff, which enabled it to better manage staff wellbeing and health and safety, and to make more effective decisions on how to allocate work. This included information about recording absences, self-isolation, testing, training for managers and returning to work. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

### *Staff engagement*

37. 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 virtual team meetings, written correspondence, and one-to-ones with a manager about wellbeing and health and safety. The chief fire officer posted weekly video messages that were shared with all staff. The service made use of telephone, email, social media, virtual meeting platforms and video blogs when communicating with on-call staff during the pandemic.

38. The service intends to maintain changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19, including the new technology it introduced to facilitate virtual meetings. The service will allow staff to work remotely, whilst maintaining the balance of face-to-face interaction. It will also continue to collaborate with its Thames Valley FRS partners to provide a targeted response to community needs.

### **Working with others, and making changes locally**

39. To protect communities, fire and rescue staff including firefighters 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.

40. The service carried out the following new activities: driving ambulances, assisting vulnerable people, delivering PPE, packing/repacking food parcels for vulnerable people, and delivering training to care home staff.

41. 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.

42. The service consulted locally to implement the tripartite agreement with the FBU and the Fire Officers Association. Other unions were engaged, including UNISON, if their members were asked to do extra work, including those activities covered under the tripartite agreement. 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.

43. There were extra requests for work by partner agencies that fell outside the tripartite agreement, including the distribution of PPE across the Thames Valley. Throughout the pandemic, service staff helped the Thames Valley LRF's logistics cell to co-ordinate and manage the distribution of emergency supplies to key services, including care homes and primary care services. On-call staff helped facilitate a COVID-19 testing site at the request of Buckinghamshire

Council. This work was agreed and undertaken on time and in line with the request from the partner agency.

44. All new work, including that done under the tripartite agreement, was risk-assessed and complied with the health and safety requirements. All activities to support other organisations during this period were monitored and reviewed. The service has identified which to continue, for example, helping medical staff to gain entry to private properties. The relationship between Buckinghamshire FRS and South Central Ambulance Service has been strengthened as a result of FRS staff driving ambulances. Staff will continue to maintain their ambulance driving competencies and there will be joint training in future.

#### *Local resilience forum*

45. 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) – in this case, Thames Valley LRF.

46. 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.

47. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the service chaired the community hub working group, the media advisory cell and the finance and legal group. The service provided the deputy chair for the tactical co-ordinating group and provided representation on the LRF executive board and strategic co-ordinating group. It was a member of the death management group and the testing cell. The service was able to allocate suitably qualified staff to participate in these groups without affecting its core duties.

#### **Use of resources**

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

49. The service has made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. Up to 30 June, its main extra costs were £43,000 on PPE, £29,000 on the upgrade in technology, £10,000 on cleaning materials, £66,000 on overtime and £1,000 on signage to reinforce critical messages on hygiene and social distancing. It fully understands the effect this will have on its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings.

50. As of 30 June 2020, the service has spent £149,000 of its £696,000 of extra government funding to support its response. It spent this money on PPE, cleaning materials, an upgrade in technology, overtime and signage. It has shown how it used this income efficiently, and that it mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period.

51. The service didn't use any of its reserves to meet the extra costs that arose during this period. When used, overtime was managed appropriately. The service made sure that its staff who worked overtime had enough rest between shifts.

### *Ways of working*

52. The service changed how it operates during the pandemic. For example, to maintain productivity it enabled staff to work at different locations within the service. 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.

53. 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.

54. 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.

55. 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*

56. 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. 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. The service assisted South Central Ambulance Service by driving ambulances, and supported Buckinghamshire Council at a coronavirus testing facility. The service also provided staff to assist the logistics cell with administering and distributing PPE.

57. For most of the pandemic, the main role for wholetime firefighters was to provide the service's core responsibilities, while work under the tripartite agreement was done by other parts of the workforce. This approach was taken because the service felt this was the best way to make sure it had the resources it needed to meet its foreseeable risk. We expect the service to keep its processes under review to make sure it uses its wholetime workforce as productively as possible.

58. The on-call workforce took on extra responsibilities covering some of the roles agreed as part of the tripartite agreement, with the assistance of prevention staff.

## **Governance of the service's response**

59. Each fire and rescue service is overseen by a fire and rescue authority (FRA). 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.

60. Members of Buckinghamshire 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.

61. The authority maintained effective ways of working with the service during the pandemic. This made sure the service could fulfil its statutory duties as well as its extra work supporting the LRF and the tripartite arrangements. The service regularly updated fire and rescue authority members 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.

62. During the pandemic, the FRA 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**

63. 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.

64. Buckinghamshire FRS is an active member of the Thames Valley collaboration group, strengthening its relationships with its partners, local authorities and South Central Ambulance Service. This has enabled the emergency services to support the LRF more effectively, which in turn has provided better service to communities across the Thames Valley. Buckinghamshire FRS is looking at ways its workforce can support these organisations more consistently especially during periods of high demand.

65. It has developed the way it communicates with staff and explored different ways of working during the pandemic, which has helped different parts of the workforce to connect and work together. The service also transformed its use of technology and is considering how virtual platforms and remote working can help it become more effective and efficient.

66. Good practice and what worked was shared with other services in the Thames Valley collaboration group. The service moved into the new Blue Light Hub in Milton Keynes on 30 June 2020, despite the pandemic. Thames Valley Police, South Central Ambulance Service and NHS Blood and Transplant will join them in the new building later this year.

67. The hub's design promotes engagement between the three services. It includes flexible working spaces for all services, and informal breakout spaces to promote collaboration.

68. The service introduced a professor of operations and critical systems from the University of Manchester to the LRF to improve efficiencies and assist local authorities in creating effective volunteer schemes.

69. An apprentice recruitment process for operational activity during the pandemic was completed. This followed all government guidance on social distancing and hygiene. It used its own facilities at first, then moved to an external provider when their facilities reopened. The process was recorded and shared with others electronically.

### **Next steps**

70. 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 may follow up some of our findings.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M Parr', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

### **Matt Parr CB**

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Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary