

**Matt Parr CB**

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

John Beard  
Chief Fire Officer  
Cumbria Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor Janet Willis  
Portfolio Lead  
Cumbria County Council

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Beard and Cllr Willis,

**COVID-19 INSPECTION: CUMBRIA 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 1 and 18 September 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

5. In relation to your service, Cumbria Local Resilience Forum (LRF) declared a major incident on 11 March 2020.

6. In summary, the service adapted and responded to the pandemic effectively. It continued to respond to emergencies and it gave additional support to the community during the first phase of the pandemic. It used both its wholetime and on-call firefighters to respond to emergencies and

give additional activities. Operational staff visited the most vulnerable people and wore personal protective equipment (PPE) when they did so. By adapting and responding effectively, the service supported the people of Cumbria well during the first phase of the pandemic.

7. The service managed resources well. As well as its own incidents, the service was able to support neighbouring services with significant incidents during the pandemic. Its financial position was largely unaffected, and it didn't have to use its reserves. It also communicated well with its staff, through virtual meeting platforms and video blogs. The service has provided good wellbeing support to its staff during the pandemic. A notable achievement was Cumbria's ability to continue to run a whole-time recruitment process during the pandemic. It used technology and training platforms in the early stages, before safely bringing recruits together for more traditional training methods.

8. 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, Cumbria Fire and Rescue 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 identify those staff at higher risk from COVID-19, so it can put appropriate wellbeing and support provisions in place.

### **Preparing for the pandemic**

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

10. 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.

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

12. 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 and supply of PPE.

### **Fulfilling statutory functions**

13. 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.

14. 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 visit vulnerable people in the community who are at the greatest risk of fire. It has also continued to audit its highest-risk premises.

### *Response*

15. 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.

16. 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 96.3 percent compared with 87 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 because of being furloughed from their primary employment.

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

18. 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.

19. North West Fire Control had good arrangements in place so that its control room had enough staff during the pandemic.

20. These included effective resilience arrangements, such as adapting ways of working, and having good fallback provision with West Midlands Fire Service and London Fire Brigade as part of a tri-services agreement.

### *Prevention*

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

22. The service conducted more home fire safety checks 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.

23. The service decided to continue to offer face-to-face home fire safety checks because it could give staff suitable PPE.

24. The service introduced the option of a home fire safety check by telephone instead of face to face. Using vulnerability data from partners, the service was able to identify more high-risk individuals. It offered them welfare checks and advice over the telephone. If there was a need, staff visited them to fit smoke alarms and supply other preventative measures. The service developed and provided virtual education packages for schools.

### *Protection*

25. The NFCC issued guidance on how to continue protection activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes maintaining a risk-based approach, completing desktop audits and issuing enforcement notices electronically. Activity included carrying out audits on those premises that are at the greatest risk from fire. The service adopted this guidance.

26. The service reviewed how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic. As a result, it added schools, hotels and campsites as being at an increased risk from fire.

27. The service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it would normally undertake. The service continued face-to-face fire safety audits and enforcement activity because it could give staff suitable PPE. It also introduced risk-based desktop appraisals instead of face-to-face audits, to minimise face-to-face contact between members of staff and the public.

28. The service continued to issue alteration notices, enforcement notices and prohibition notices. It continued to respond to statutory building control consultations.

29. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as completing more desktop assessments. It sent and received still images and video electronically. It also gave virtual advice to schools through the local authority education department, and business advice through the chamber of commerce.

30. 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.

31. A recovery centre for discharged patients was located in the service area. The service worked with the responsible person to put in place suitable and reasonable fire safety measures.

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

32. Staff wellbeing was a 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.

33. Most staff survey respondents told us that they could access services to support their mental wellbeing if needed. Support put in place for staff included individual support through occupational health, counselling and peer support, and a frequently asked questions section and

other information on the intranet. The service has discussed with its staff how it should plan for the potential longer-term effects of COVID-19 on its workforce.

34. The service did not have all the relevant data on its staff, including ethnicity, to identify those who could have been more at risk from COVID-19. As such, it wasn't able to address specific needs of those from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background and those with underlying health problems.

35. Wellbeing best practice such as risk assessments, including social distancing, were 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.

36. 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.

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

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

#### *Staff absence*

39. Absences have decreased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of shifts lost due to sickness absence decreased by 10.3 percent between 1 April and 30 June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019.

40. 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 recording absences, self-isolation, testing and training for managers, and bereavement. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

#### *Staff engagement*

41. 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 staff virtual team meetings, written correspondence and one-to-ones with a manager about wellbeing and health and safety.

42. Most on-call firefighter survey respondents told us that they received either the same amount or more communication during the pandemic. The service made use of telephone, email, social media and virtual meeting platforms when communicating with on-call staff.

43. Because of changes to the service's ways of working in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it intends to maintain the use of virtual communication platforms, and remote and flexible working, as part of its usual processes.

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

44. 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.

45. The service carried out the following new activities: assisting vulnerable people; face fitting for masks; delivering PPE; and packing/repacking food for vulnerable people.

46. 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 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.

47. The service consulted locally to implement the tripartite agreement with the FBU, the Fire Officers' Association and the Fire and Rescue Service Association.

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

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

50. All activities to support other organisations during this period were monitored and reviewed. The service has identified which to continue, for example testing and fitting for face masks for those working in the care sector and delivering essential supplies to vulnerable people.

### *Local resilience forum*

51. 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. Cumbria Fire and Rescue Service is a member of Cumbria LRF.

52. The service has been an active member of the LRF during the pandemic. It told us that the LRF's arrangements enabled the service to be fully engaged in the multi-agency response.

53. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the service was responsible for setting up the tactical and strategic level structure with the LRF. The service was represented at all of these groups. The service was involved in chairing the body movement board and co-ordinating a temporary mortuary.

### **Use of resources**

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

55. 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: £51,000 for overtime and staffing; £36,000 for PPE; and smaller costs for cleaning and decontamination, and IT equipment. It has identified a loss of income from training of £141,000. It fully understands the effect this will have on its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings.

56. The service received £94,990 of extra government funding from the county council to support its response. At the time of our inspection it spent money on overtime for staff, PPE, cleaning and decontamination. It has shown how it used this income efficiently, and that it mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period.

57. The service didn't use any of its reserves to meet the extra costs that arose during this period. This didn't affect its ability to maintain the smooth running of its service 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 how it operates during the pandemic. For example, the service has effectively used the pandemic to fast-track its digital transformation. It had the necessary IT to support remote working where appropriate. Where new IT equipment 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.

61. The service 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.

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 reallocate resources where necessary to support the work of its partner organisations.

64. 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.

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

66. The on-call workforce took on extra responsibilities covering most of the roles agreed as part of the tripartite agreement and the shifts of absent wholetime staff.

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

67. 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.

68. Cumbria Fire and Rescue Authority and the portfolio lead were actively engaged in discussions with the chief fire officer and the service on the service's ability to discharge its statutory functions during the pandemic.

69. The fire and rescue authority maintained effective ways of working with the service during the pandemic. It made use of technology and held meetings virtually. This made sure the service could fulfil its statutory duties as well as its extra work supporting the LRF and the tripartite arrangements.

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

## **Looking to the future**

71. 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.

72. The service has created a recovery group to look at which new ways of working it will continue to use post-pandemic. The service has improved its collaboration with other LRF

partners, particularly the way in which information between partner organisations about vulnerable people in the community is shared. The service's improved communication and approach to flexible working have helped its response to the pandemic. The service has transformed its use of technology to support remote working and to create virtual platforms for delivering training, prevention and protection activities. It plans to adopt these changes to become more efficient and effective. The service will be reviewing how well it responded to the pandemic and will add any lessons learned into its improvement plan.

73. Good practice and what worked was shared with other services through the NFCC and regional networks. This includes the approach that the service has taken to wholetime recruitment, and the use of risk assessments to consider social distancing. The service shared both of these developments as good practice.

### **Next steps**

74. 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 may follow up some of our findings.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M Parr', followed by a long horizontal flourish.

### **Matt Parr CB**

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