

Lee Howell
Chief Fire Officer
Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor Sara Randall-Johnson
Chair
Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Authority

12 May 2021

Dear Mr Howell and Councillor Randall-Johnson,

DEVON AND SOMERSET FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE CAUSE OF CONCERN REVISIT

Background

We first inspected Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) in the week of 24 June 2019. During the inspection, we identified a cause of concern about how the service maintains the fitness requirements of its operational staff. This was that:

“Devon & Somerset FRS cannot assure itself that operational members of staff meet the minimum fitness requirements to perform their role.”

2. We revisited the service between 1 and 5 March 2021 to review progress against this cause of concern. The revisit took place remotely because of COVID-19 restrictions. This letter gives an update on our findings.
3. During the revisit, we interviewed staff from across the service, including the deputy chief fire officer, head of human resources, equality and inclusion manager, and members of the service's fitness team. We also reviewed a range of documents and data that the service submitted.
4. In line with the requirements in the Fire and Rescue National Framework, the service produced an action plan for resolving the problem. To address the cause of concern, the service assessed the fitness of all station-based operational staff in September and October 2019. The service considered the cause of concern to be fully addressed by these assessments.

Governance

5. The governance arrangements that the service first put in place to monitor the cause of concern were appropriate. Between July and December 2019, the service's Executive Board regularly oversaw fitness testing.

6. But, in January 2020, the service considered the cause of concern was complete and removed it from its corporate risk register. It passed responsibility for fitness testing to the service's human resources team. Since then, the Executive Board didn't get enough information to monitor and scrutinise fitness arrangements. By the time of our revisit in March 2021, the service had recognised this gap. It is putting in place processes for closer oversight.

Progress against the cause of concern

7. While the service took early steps to resolve the problem, it didn't go far enough. By October 2019, it had assessed the fitness of all operational staff in stations. But this didn't include all operational staff across the service – notably, those not on direct response duties. The service rectified this. Between September and December 2020, the assessments were extended to all operational staff, including senior officers. But, disappointingly, this didn't happen until about a year after the service judged the cause of concern to be complete.

8. In September 2020, the service introduced a new physical fitness testing policy. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has yet to test whether it has the resources for the full range of assessments needed. This has hampered the policy's implementation. The service must review whether it has enough resources for everything in the policy.

9. During the revisit, we sampled 51 fitness assessment records at random. Most fitness assessments were recorded in line with the service policy. Six, however, were either recorded inconsistently or had no data.

10. The service has a policy for failing the annual fitness assessment. Most sampled records were in line with the policy. One file wasn't: it used a special measures risk assessment to see whether the individual could do a different role. The service should assure itself that it treats consistently staff who fail the annual fitness assessment.

11. The service's fitness advisers work closely with staff who need extra support. Each person gets a detailed improvement programme tailored to their needs. This has resulted in fitness levels improving. The service makes reasonable adjustments when needed – for example, staff can be offered an alternative to the bleep test.

12. The service collects equality data for its three-yearly fitness tests. It doesn't routinely do so for its annual fitness assessments but plans to. It will use this data to consider whether the fitness assessments adversely affect staff because of their age or gender.

13. Data provided by the service shows that 88 percent of operational staff who were assessed passed their fitness assessment in 2020 (1,223 of 1,396). This compares with 74 percent in 2019 (1,145 of 1,551).

Conclusion

14. This is the first time we have assessed progress against this cause of concern. We were pleased to see that the service has made some progress, but more work is needed. The service must have better governance arrangements and assurance processes in place.

15. From the data supplied by the service, it is encouraging to see that 88 percent of operational staff have now passed their fitness assessment. The fitness team has extra temporary capacity and a new fitness testing policy has been introduced. But the resourcing model and the full capabilities of the policy remain to be tested.

16. We will continue to monitor progress through updates from the service and data returns. We will revisit Devon and Somerset FRS in autumn 2021 to make sure that it has made satisfactory progress.

17. This letter will be published on our website.

Yours sincerely,



Wendy Williams CBE

HM Inspector of Fire and Rescue Services