

Dave Russel
Chief Fire Officer
Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service

Baroness Beverley Hughes CP
Deputy Mayor for Policing, Crime, Criminal Justice and Fire
Greater Manchester Combined Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Russel and Deputy Mayor,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: GREATER MANCHESTER 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 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, Greater Manchester Local Resilience Forum (LRF) declared a major incident on 20 March 2020.
6. In summary, the service maintained its statutory functions of prevention, protection and response during the pandemic, despite operating in a unique and challenging environment.

7. While implementing a major change programme and participating in a public inquiry, the service provided some additional support to the community during the first phase of the pandemic. However, it could have done more, especially as the local Fire Brigades Union (FBU) opposed its members undertaking some additional activity requested by partners. The service therefore predominantly used its non-operational staff, retired firefighters and community volunteers to support partner organisations, while wholetime firefighters were used solely to respond to emergencies. This included responding to some significant fires during this period.

8. The service's financial position was largely unaffected, especially as it didn't have to use reserves. The service was able to respond quickly to staff absences and acted to improve resilience at fire stations, despite having higher sickness levels as a result of COVID-19, and against a longer-term backdrop of having fewer staff than it needed. The service has a backlog of firefighters needing risk-critical training as this training was suspended during the initial stages of the pandemic. The service now has a plan in place to reduce this backlog.

9. The service communicated well with its staff throughout the pandemic, including on issues relating to staff wellbeing. It made sure all staff had the resources they needed to do their jobs effectively. This included giving them extra IT and putting in place new flexible working arrangements.

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, Greater Manchester 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 make sure it negotiates effectively with all appropriate staff associations about subjects relevant to their members.

(c) It should make sure wholetime firefighters are fully productive, while minimising the risk of them contracting or spreading the virus.

(d) It should identify those staff at higher risk from COVID-19, so it can put appropriate wellbeing and support provisions in place.

(e) It should consider how to make sure all its operational staff continue to have the risk-critical skills and fitness they need. This includes giving them the required training and, where appropriate, assessment or revalidation.

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

14. The plans now include further detail on what elements of the service should maintain response capability if staff absences are greater than normal. These are the degradation arrangements. The plans now include further detail on prevention, protection, response and support functions, social distancing, making premises 'COVID-secure', remote working, supply of personal protective equipment (PPE), training, cleaning and hygiene, self-isolating, and track and trace.

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 attended emergencies. It has continued to visit vulnerable people who are at the greatest risk from fire in the community. And it has continued to serve enforcement and prohibition notices to its highest risk premises.

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 broadly the same during the pandemic as it was during the same period in 2019. Between 1 April and 30 June 2020, the service's average overall fire engine availability was 89.2 percent compared with 91.7 percent during the same period in 2019. The service maintained its availability by using overtime to cover sickness, and by creating staff bubbles to minimise the risk of virus transmission in order to ensure greater resilience. It also moved second fire engines to stations that had lower availability.

19. The service didn't change its crewing models or shift patterns during this period. It did increase its use of sending out fire engines with a crew of four. This is the service's minimum agreed crewing level.

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 better fire engine availability and less road traffic during this period. This may not be reflected in [official statistics recently published by the Home Office](#), because services don't all collect and calculate their data the same way.

21. The service is one of four to have a control function provided by North West Fire Control. It had good arrangements in place to make sure that its control room had enough staff during the pandemic.

22. This included effective resilience arrangements, such as having supervisors work from home, changing the control room layout to maintain social distance, and having good fallback provision with West Midlands Fire Service and London Fire Brigade control rooms.

Prevention

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

24. 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.

25. The service decided to stop offering face-to-face safe and well visits as it chose to protect operational crews to maintain firefighters' resilience. As an alternative, the service introduced the option of a safe and well visit by telephone. Prevention staff and firefighters made these calls. If necessary, firefighters made face-to-face visits to fit smoke alarms and offer other preventative measures. The service ran several safety campaigns during the pandemic. These were tailored to current risks (for example, the period coincided with warm weather and the risk of outdoor fires, including from disposable barbecues).

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 broadly adopted this guidance.

27. The service reviewed how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic.

28. The service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it would normally undertake. 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.

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

30. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as making telephone calls to businesses, and giving advice and written guidance by post.

31. 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.

32. A Nightingale hospital was established in the service area. The service worked with the hospital's responsible person to put in place suitable and reasonable fire safety measures.

Staff health and safety and wellbeing

33. The service gave sufficient consideration to staff wellbeing during the pandemic.

34. 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, specialist counselling, peer support and external support services. The service also produced a handbook and implemented a new section on its intranet with guidance for staff.

35. More could have been done to identify and address the specific needs of staff members most at risk from COVID-19, including those from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background and those with underlying health problems. These members of staff didn't get the tailored support that they may have needed. Rather than proactively identifying those most at risk and using staff networks, the service relied on individuals identifying themselves.

36. Wellbeing best practice was also 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. The service has already looked at firefighter fitness when returning to work after recovering from the virus.

37. Some important risk-critical training (including breathing apparatus and incident command) was suspended during the pandemic. As a result, the service now has a backlog of firefighters who need this training, including those who need refresher training to ensure currency of their skills. The service now has a plan in place to reduce this backlog.

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

39. 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

40. Absences have decreased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of days/shifts lost due to sickness absence between 1 April and 30 June 2020 decreased by 16.7 percent compared with the same period in 2019.

41. 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. The service

developed a staff handbook; this included information about recording absences, as well as self-isolation, testing, training for managers, and bereavement. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

Staff engagement

42. 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 video blogs from the previous chief fire officer, virtual team meetings, and one-to-ones between managers and staff about wellbeing and health and safety.

43. The service intends to maintain some changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19, including the use of virtual meetings and flexible working patterns.

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: moving bodies, face fitting for masks, and delivering PPE.

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 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.

47. The service consulted locally to implement the activities covered by the tripartite agreement with the FBU, the Fire Officers Association, UNISON and Unite.

48. The service found negotiations with the FBU around the tripartite agreement to be extremely challenging. Requests were received from partner agencies for the service to assist them. Despite a clear willingness from the service and its staff to support its local communities, the local FBU was opposed. For example, the FBU opposed its members delivering safety information to vulnerable people. As a result, the service was unable to use its wholetime firefighters as it wanted.

49. To overcome this, the service used staff who weren't FBU members to carry out these additional activities. Most of the tripartite activities were therefore carried out by re-engaged retired firefighters, non-operational staff and community volunteers. Wholetime firefighters' time

was preserved to respond to emergencies, and to deliver smoke alarms to vulnerable people in the community.

50. This is clearly an undesirable situation whereby the service is prevented from using its staff in the way it needs. It undoubtedly caused a delay in how quickly the service could support its partners. Firefighters are also highly skilled, and so it may have been preferable to use these skills rather than the other staff members the service could deploy. The service recognises this issue and is working towards improving its relationship with its local FBU. Doing so will enable negotiations to be more constructive in the future.

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 local resilience forum (LRF). Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service is a member of Greater Manchester LRF.

52. 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.

53. The service was represented at strategic and tactical groups. The service was able to allocate suitably qualified staff to participate in these groups without affecting its core duties.

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 £430,000 spent on pre-arranged overtime, £105,500 spent on IT, £108,000 spent on PPE, and £42,000 spent on cleaning and decontamination of buildings. It fully understands the effect this will have on its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings. Some savings have been made on travel and fuel, as people were working from home and using technology for meetings that they would normally have travelled to.

56. The service received £2.7 million of extra government funding to support its response. At the time of our inspection it had spent (and forecast to spend) £2.2 million of this money on overtime, IT equipment and PPE. 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.

58. The service has an over-reliance on overtime to cover sickness. 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 conducted most of its meetings virtually, both with staff and its fire and rescue authority. 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.

61. 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.

Staffing

62. 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.

63. 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.

64. 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 and respond to emergencies.

65. We expect services to keep their processes under review to make sure they use their wholetime workforce as productively as possible.

66. As part of its workforce planning, the service re-engaged retired members of staff to support its work under the agreed changes.

67. The service gave enough consideration to making sure its re-engaged staff were physically fit and competent for the work they were asked to do.

Governance of the service's response

68. Each fire and rescue service is overseen by a fire and rescue authority. There are several different governance arrangements in place across England with the size of the authority varying 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.

69. The mayor of Greater Manchester has responsibility for Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service as part of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. Greater Manchester Combined Authority is therefore the fire and rescue authority. Day-to-day responsibility for the fire service is overseen by the deputy mayor.

70. The deputy mayor and the service maintained a constructive relationship during the pandemic, and had regular conversations on the service's ability to discharge its statutory functions during the pandemic.

71. During the pandemic, the deputy mayor continued to give the service proportionate oversight and scrutiny, including of its decision-making process. She did this by regularly communicating with the chief fire officer and receiving the service's written briefings. Arrangements were put in place to give her relevant and regular information about how the service responded to the pandemic.

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. Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service has improved its collaboration with its LRF partners. Benefits brought about by this closer collaboration include better provision of information between partner organisations about vulnerable people in the community. The service's improved communication and ways of working have had a positive effect on staff wellbeing. The service has transformed its use of technology to support remote working, and to use virtual meetings to improve efficiency through reducing travel costs. It plans to continue with these new ways of working to become more efficient and effective. The service has regularly reviewed how it has responded to the pandemic. It will use any lessons learned in future planning.

74. Good practice and what worked was shared with other services through the NFCC and regional networks. This includes its staff handbook, and its mortuary and Nightingale hospital work.

Next steps

75. 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 will follow up on our findings.

Yours sincerely,

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in black ink. The signature reads "Zoë Billingham" in a cursive script.

Zoë Billingham

Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary