

Darren Dovey
Chief Fire Officer
Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service

Stephen Mold
Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Dovey and Commissioner Mold,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: NORTHAMPTONSHIRE 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 14 and 25 September 2020. This letter summarises our findings.
5. In relation to your service, Northamptonshire's strategic co-ordinating group declared a major incident on 19 March 2020.
6. In summary, the service worked proactively to provide additional support to the community during the first phase of the pandemic. Staff from across the workforce worked closely with partners supporting the needs of their local communities.

7. The service prioritised the wellbeing of its staff. It set up a network at the start of the pandemic to inform its decisions, and increased the size of its wellbeing team. Additional support was provided to those working from home and those carrying out work outside of their normal role. The service used government advice to identify those most at risk from COVID-19, including those from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background, and carried out individual risk assessments to ensure their safety. A system of COVID alerts was introduced to complement communication routes already in place. The alerts were used to ensure all staff were kept up to date with the latest information and guidance.

8. Following on from our first inspection in late 2018, the service put several processes in place to make sure it had the appropriate scrutiny and oversight of fire engine availability and maintenance of competencies. This put the service in a good place to manage its resources. The service maintained critical skills and provided training to 20 wholetime firefighters internally when there was a short notice change in the arrangements at the Fire Service College.

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. To be as efficient and effective as possible, Northamptonshire 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 consider whether the shared plans it uses (such as the Northamptonshire Pandemic Influenza Plan, plans owned by the local resilience forum, etc) are comprehensive enough to meet the specific needs of the service and its community. If not, the service should make sure the plans change to reflect these needs.

(c) It should determine how it can improve its IT and systems so that staff can work effectively remotely.

Preparing for the pandemic

10. In line with good governance, the service had business continuity plans in place. The service had no pandemic flu plan in place but relied upon that of the local resilience forum (LRF). A combination of existing plans was implemented to ensure a command, control and communication structure was established.

11. 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.

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

13. Its 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, remote working, multi-agency structures, supply of personal protective equipment (PPE), sickness controls and training.

Fulfilling statutory functions

14. 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.

15. The service has continued to provide its core statutory functions throughout the pandemic, adjusting its priorities 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 also continued to undertake prevention and protection work, with a particular focus on individuals, organisations and properties with increased risk and vulnerabilities due to the pandemic. These include rough sleepers and homeless people being held in temporary accommodation, care homes and schools. It was also involved in assessing possible Nightingale hospital sites, and joint messaging with partners.

Response

16. The service told us that it attended fewer incidents between 1 April and 30 June 2020 than it did during the same period in 2019.

17. To reduce the need to move firefighters across the service to crew fire engines, it used local on-call firefighters and only moved personnel from other stations to crew engines to their minimum level.

18. 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 81.6 percent compared with 67.2 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 they were working from home or furloughed from their primary employment.

19. 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 ongoing work to improve availability, lower sickness levels 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.

20. The service had good arrangements in place to make sure its control room had enough staff during the pandemic. This included upskilling other staff so they could work in control if needed, and strengthening contingency arrangements with Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service.

Prevention

21. The NFCC issued guidance outlining 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 fewer home fire safety checks and 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. As a result, it added people living alone, isolated elderly people, and those suffering from domestic abuse as being at increased risk from fire. It carried out proactive work with partners, conducted telephone assessments to triage home safety work, and carried out some face-to-face assessments of the most vulnerable.
23. The service decided to continue offering face-to-face home fire safety checks and safe and well visits on a risk-assessed basis. These were conducted by staff provided with PPE.
24. The service introduced the option of a virtual home fire safety check by telephone instead of face-to-face home fire safety checks and safe and well visits.

Protection

25. The NFCC issued guidance on how to continue protection activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. The service adopted this guidance, which includes maintaining a risk-based approach, completing 'desktop audits', and issuing enforcement notices electronically. Face-to-face audits were carried out at the highest risk premises when appropriate.
26. The service didn't review how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic. But it did target those premises it considers to be the highest risk as a result of the pandemic, such as care homes and accommodation used temporarily, as a result of COVID-19.
27. By doing more fire safety audits virtually than in person, the service conducted more fire safety audits than it would normally undertake. It decided to continue face-to-face fire safety audits and enforcement work on a risk-assessed basis, conducted by staff provided with 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.
28. The service continued enforcement activity and issued enforcement notices and prohibition notices. It also continued responding to statutory building control consultations and fire safety concerns.
29. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as using telephone or email to make the initial contact, completing more desktop appraisals, using video conferencing and adapting visits to limit the amount of face-to-face contact, reducing the risk to staff and customers.
30. No Nightingale hospitals were located in the service area, but the service contributed to the risk assessment of potential sites and physically visited those shortlisted, with partners.

Staff health and safety and wellbeing

31. 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.

32. 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, including a 24-hour helpline.

33. Staff most at risk from 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 its staff to develop and implement processes to manage the risk. A network was set up to inform wellbeing decisions. A COVID-19 equality impact assessment was produced, and a personal risk assessment carried out for staff who were identified as most at risk. In addition to weekly updates, all staff were kept informed of new advice or guidance via a system of COVID-19 alerts.

34. Wellbeing best practice was 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 the workforce.

35. 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.

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

37. The service provided its workforce with appropriate PPE, although it did face some challenges in doing so. It participated in the national fire sector scheme to procure PPE, which allowed it to achieve value for money. Where needed, it used sharing arrangements through the LRF, and joint stores provision with Northamptonshire Police to supplement its supply.

Staff absence

38. Absences have decreased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of days or shifts lost due to sickness absence between 1 April and 30 June 2020 decreased by 18.1 percent compared with the same period in 2019.

39. The service issued guidance in the form of COVID-19 alerts 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, and testing. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

Staff engagement

40. 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 in the form of COVID alerts, one-to-ones with a manager or equivalent, and face-to-face visits with staff about wellbeing and health and safety.
41. The service made use of telephone, email, virtual meeting platforms, COVID alerts and socially distanced station visits when communicating with on-call staff during the pandemic.
42. The service intends to maintain changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19, including home/flexible working and further improving its technology. It has increased the size of its wellbeing support team, and intends to provide more wellbeing webinars.

Working with others, and making changes locally

43. 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 community.
44. The service carried out the following new activities: moving the deceased, assisting vulnerable people, delivering PPE, assisting East Midlands Ambulance Service NHS Trust (East Midlands Ambulance Service) and delivering medicines.
45. 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.
46. The service consulted locally to implement the tripartite agreement with the FBU, Fire Officers' Association, Fire and Rescue Services Association, UNISON and GMB.
47. All the new work done by the service under the tripartite agreement was agreed on time for it start promptly and in line with the request from the partner agency.
48. Any new work, including that done under the tripartite agreement, was risk-assessed and complied with the health and safety requirements.
49. Although no additional payment was made to staff who volunteered for a new role, all staff were paid in line with normal terms and conditions.

50. The service hasn't yet fully reviewed and evaluated its activities to support other organisations during this period. Some evaluation has been carried out by the LRF community resilience cell and East Midlands Ambulance Service. The service hasn't yet formally identified which activities to continue.

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. Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service is a member of Northamptonshire 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 be fully engaged in the multi-agency response.

53. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the service was a member of the following operational 'cells' that support the LRF's overall strategy to manage COVID-19: strategic co-ordination, excess deaths (mortality management), community resilience, and PPE. The service was able to allocate suitably qualified staff to participate in these groups without affecting its core duties.

Use of resources

54. In January 2019, governance of Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service moved from Northamptonshire County Council to the Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner. We last inspected the service in late 2018 before the governance transfer and found that there were considerable financial restrictions placed on it. While the service's financial position hasn't yet been significantly affected by COVID-19, it still has limited resources and remains in a difficult financial position.

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 £85,000 on PPE, £60,000 on staffing costs, and £71,000 on cleaning and decontamination supplies. It also lost £48,000 in training income. It fully understands the effect this will have on its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings.

56. The service received £660,000 of extra government funding to support its response. At the time of our inspection, it had spent £380,000 of this money including on PPE, staffing costs, making premises COVID-secure, and cleaning and decontamination supplies. The remaining money is earmarked for COVID-19-related activity, including IT equipment and further staffing and PPE-related costs. 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 additional costs that arose during this period.

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

Ways of working

59. The service changed how it operates during the pandemic. For example, it developed remote working practices for its prevention and protection activities, and it used virtual technology for meetings, internal communication and training. As a result of its legacy financial issues, the IT infrastructure was not initially in place to fully support virtual working. The service took steps to put in place 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 was able to 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.

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. All staff were offered an opportunity to support additional activities. This approach was taken because the service felt this was the fairest way to make sure it had the resources it needed to meet its foreseeable risk.

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

67. The on-call workforce took on extra responsibilities covering some of the roles agreed as part of the tripartite agreement and the shifts of absent wholetime staff. In addition, prevention team staff supported the delivery of medicines on behalf of local pharmacies.

Governance of the service's response

68. There are several different governance arrangements in place for fire and rescue services across England. Each ultimately has the same function: to set the service's priorities and budget and make sure that the budget is spent wisely. Northamptonshire's Police and Crime Commissioner (PFCC) has responsibility for the fire service in Northamptonshire.

69. The PFCC was 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.

70. The PFCC and the service maintained a constructive relationship and, during the pandemic, maintained effective ways of working. This made sure the service could fulfil its statutory duties as well as its extra work supporting the LRF and the tripartite arrangements.

71. During the pandemic, the PFCC continued to give the service proportionate oversight and scrutiny, including of its decision-making process. He did this by regularly communicating with the chief fire officer, having a representative of the PFCC at the service's gold meetings, and receiving the service's written briefings. The PFCC visited several fire stations during the pandemic to ensure visibility with staff.

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. Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service has further improved its collaboration with local authority partners, the police and the ambulance service and is looking at more permanent ways of working with them. The service is looking at how it can better exchange data with local health partners in the long term to improve its prevention activity. The service developed its use of technology and is considering how virtual platforms and remote working can help it become more effective and efficient. Under the governance of the Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner, an enabling services project is in place to further develop the police/fire collaboration.

74. Good practice and what worked was shared with other services through several routes. These included regular information exchanges via the NFCC, digital platforms such as Workplace, and regular regional and national forums. Information shared includes risk assessments, strategy documents and comparison of working arrangements. The chief fire officer presented at a national briefing about wellbeing. He also participates in a weekly call between regional senior officers, including East Midlands Ambulance Service. This enabled the senior leaders of these organisations to compare some of the issues being experienced and agree a regional approach. The service has actively engaged in regional and national debriefs and has conducted its own internal process, including a staff survey, to promote further learning.

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 handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Zoë Billingham". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large 'Z' and 'B'. The signature is placed on a light grey, textured rectangular background.

Zoë Billingham

Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary