

Rob MacDougall
Chief Fire Officer
Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor Judith Heathcoat
Chair
Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr MacDougall and Cllr Heathcoat,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: OXFORDSHIRE 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 28 September to 9 October 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 its wholtime and on-call firefighters to respond to emergencies, and the increased availability of its on-call firefighters allowed the service to use them to support its

partners, especially the local ambulance trust. This meant the people of Oxfordshire were well supported through the pandemic.

7. Firefighters drove ambulances and helped deliver personal protective equipment (PPE) and laptops to schoolchildren. The service was able to continue prevention activity and broadly maintained all protection activity. Resources were well managed, and the service's financial position was largely unaffected. As part of Oxfordshire County Council, the service had access to extra government funding to support its response and to cover additional expenses it has incurred. The service effectively managed its (low) level of staff absences, and collaborated with the other fire and rescue services in the Thames Valley region in order to build resilience in its primary and secondary control rooms.

8. The service communicated well with its staff throughout the pandemic on issues relating to staff wellbeing. Guidance and support, including extra wellbeing services, were put in place for those at higher risk from COVID-19 including black, Asian and minority ethnic staff. The service also made sure all staff had the resources they needed to do their jobs effectively, including providing extra IT and putting in place new flexible working arrangements. The service has continued to collaborate with the other fire and rescue services in the Thames Valley region, and to effectively support the Thames Valley LRF.

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, Oxfordshire 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 evaluate how effective its extra activities have been. It should then consider how its activities can give local communities the most benefit in future.

Preparing for the pandemic

10. In line with good governance, the service had a High Absence Level Operating Plan, which effectively supported the Thames Valley LRF's flu pandemic plan. These plans were activated. They were detailed enough to enable the service to make an effective initial response, but understandably 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 learned 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, supply of PPE, prioritisation of work and recovery planning.

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 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 that the service has continued to respond to calls from the public and attend emergencies. It has also continued to undertake prevention work and carry out home safety visits using a risk-based approach in line with NFCC guidance. Face-to-face visits by operational staff and community safety advisors were only conducted for the most vulnerable people. Protection activity broadly continued – the service undertook building consultations and enforcement activity, and visited those properties that posed immediate threat to life.

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 the previous year. Between 1 April and 30 June 2020, the service's average overall fire engine availability was 84.0 percent compared with 73.6 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 due to being furloughed from their primary employment. Operational staff were also redeployed to on-call crewed stations to improve availability and maintain productivity in their normal role.

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

17. The service told us that its average response time to fires improved during the pandemic compared with the same period the previous year. 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.

18. The service had good arrangements in place to ensure that the Thames Valley Fire Control Service had enough staff during the pandemic.

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

Prevention

20. 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.

21. The service conducted fewer home fire safety checks than it normally would. The service reviewed which individuals and groups it considered to be at increased risk from fire as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, it added those at risk of arson, hate crime or domestic violence, and health and social care referrals from local authorities or other trusted partners. The service responded to each high-risk referral by Oxfordshire County Council and instigated a triage system to identify risk levels with the resident by telephone. The service would then either carry out a face-to-face visit or provide safety advice over the phone, highlighting any needs to relevant partner agencies.

22. The service decided to continue offering face-to-face home fire safety checks on a risk-assessed basis and was able to provide staff with suitable PPE to do so. It introduced the option of a home fire safety check by telephone. Community safety advisors provided safety advice during the call and encouraged residents to check their smoke alarms.

Protection

23. 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, issuing enforcement notices electronically, and carrying out audits on premises that are at greatest risk from fire. The service adopted this guidance. However, it didn't review how it defines premises as high-risk during the pandemic.

24. The service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it normally would. It continued to undertake enforcement activity and respond to statutory building control consultations.

25. The service's risk-based inspection programme was up to date at the start of the pandemic. It paused it for 10 weeks, but then recognised that it needed to re-engage with premises in pandemic conditions. It introduced risk-based desktop appraisals as an alternative to face-to-face audits for care homes, to minimise face-to-face contact between members of staff and the public. It then extended this to other premises with vulnerable people, such as sheltered accommodation and hospitals. The service has now included student accommodation in this programme due to the increased risk of COVID-19.

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

27. The service has continued to engage with high-risk premises that have cladding similar to that at Grenfell Tower, in particular premises where temporary evacuation procedures are in place.

28. A temporary mortuary 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

29. Staff wellbeing was a clear priority for the service during the pandemic. It identified wellbeing concerns and responded to them, 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 meditation.

31. 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 staff to develop and implement processes to manage the risk, including individual risk assessments. The service ensured that its most vulnerable staff shielded, and it adopted flexible ways of working to enable working from home. Where necessary, alternative roles were identified both within the service and Oxfordshire County Council.

32. Wellbeing best practice was also shared with other services. The service doesn't yet have plans to discuss with its staff the potential longer-term effects of COVID-19 on its workforce.

33. The service made sure that firefighters were competent to do their work during the pandemic. This included enabling firefighters to maintain their fitness at fire station gyms. 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 appropriate PPE in a timely manner and ensured that it achieved value for money. It procured enough PPE before the outbreak, so it had no need to participate in the national fire sector PPE procurement scheme.

Staff absence

35. Absences have decreased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of days/shifts lost due to sickness absence decreased by 20.7 percent between 1 April and 30 June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019.

36. The service forms part of Oxfordshire County Council, so it uses the council's policies, including on absence. The service provided additional guidance and information to staff that enabled it to 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, training for managers, returning to work, and bereavement. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff who were either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

Staff engagement

37. Most staff survey respondents told us that the service provided them with regular and relevant communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included regular virtual team meetings, written correspondence, and one-to-one meetings with a manager. The senior leadership team would also stream live 'keeping connected' updates with staff about wellbeing and health and safety.

38. Most on-call firefighter survey respondents told us that they received more communication than usual during the pandemic. The service made use of telephone, email, social media, messaging services, virtual meeting platforms, and 'keeping connected' streams.

39. The service intends to maintain changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19, including the way it communicates with staff, and will continue to encourage dialogue with the senior leadership team through 'keeping connected' live streams. It will also continue to allow staff to work remotely as part of its usual processes. The service prioritises the wellbeing of its staff and will continue to ensure each staff member has access to the services they require.

Working with others, and making changes locally

40. To protect communities, FRS 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 local communities.

41. The service carried out the following new activities: driving ambulances, assisting vulnerable people, face fitting for masks, and delivering PPE. 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 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.

42. The service consulted locally with the FBU to implement 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, Oxfordshire FRS 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. The service has continued to collaborate with Thames Valley Police and South Central Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust (SCAS) to gain entry to private property to assist

medical response. This initiative has been effective for several years and continued during the pandemic. These interventions ensured a quicker response and faster deployment of ambulances during the pandemic. 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.

45. All activities to support other organisations during this period were monitored and reviewed. The service has identified which to continue. For example, it will continue to help medical services gain entry to private properties. Existing relationships between SCAS and the service have been strengthened as a result of service staff driving ambulances. These staff will continue to maintain their ambulance driving competencies and there will be joint training in future.

Local resilience forum

46. 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. The service was 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.

47. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the chief fire officer chaired Oxfordshire County Council's silver group, and the deputy chief fire officer was part of the LRF executive. The service also provided the deputy chair for the Thames Valley LRF logistics cell. It was a member of and provided significant command and control experience to the death management process group, testing cell, risk working group, tactical co-ordinating group and the community hub working group. 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 realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. Up until 30 June the service spent £9,000 on the staff costs of driving ambulances, £10,000 on PPE and £20,000 on cleaning and disinfectant products. It fully understands the effect this will have on its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings. Where possible, it has exploited opportunities to make savings during this period and used them to mitigate any financial risks it has identified. During this period, at the request of Oxfordshire County Council, it managed to achieve wider efficiencies of £600,000.

50. The service received £41,500 from Oxfordshire County Council to reimburse the costs it incurred through its staff driving ambulances, for PPE and cleaning products for all sites and

equipment. It has shown how it used this income efficiently, and that it mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period.

51. As part of Oxfordshire County Council, the service had access to extra government funding to support its response and to cover the additional expenses it has incurred. And it did not need to access the council's reserves during this period.

52. When used, overtime was managed appropriately. The service made sure that its staff who worked overtime had enough rest between shifts. All additional hours worked were paid at the normal hourly rate.

Ways of working

53. The service changed the way in which 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.

54. 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.

55. To ensure the effective running of the service through the pandemic, it implemented an incident command structure. As part of this, the FBU was included in silver command. This arrangement is unusual, and we have reservations about its appropriateness, as it provides the FBU with an opportunity to influence the service's response.

56. 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. It 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

57. 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.

58. 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. Protection staff were relocated to on-call crewed fire stations to provide resilience while maintaining their protection responsibilities. FRS staff were relocated to carry out logging and administrative work for the LRF and the county council.

59. As well as performing their statutory functions, wholetime firefighters volunteered for extra activities, including those under the tripartite agreement. The on-call workforce took on extra responsibilities covering most of the roles agreed as part of the tripartite agreement. This approach was taken because the service felt this was the best way to ensure it had the resources it needed to meet its foreseeable risk.

Governance of the service's response

60. 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.

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

62. The service regularly updated the fire and rescue authority 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.

63. 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

64. 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.

65. Oxfordshire FRS is an active member of the Thames Valley collaboration group, strengthening its relationships with Thames Valley Police and SCAS. This has enabled the emergency services to support the LRF more effectively, which in turn has provided a better service to communities across the Thames Valley. It is looking at ways its workforce can support these organisations more permanently, especially during periods of high demand. The service 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.

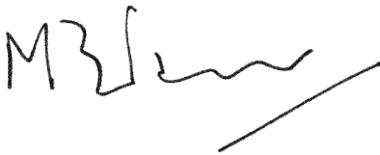
66. Good practice and what worked was shared with other partners in the Thames Valley collaboration group and other fire and rescue services across the country. During the pandemic, the service has continued to collaborate with Thames Valley Police and SCAS in gaining entry to properties for medical response. The time saved by the police is estimated at more than 200 hours per year, which is a significant saving. For ambulance service crews, there is a reduction in time spent waiting for entry to properties, and therefore quicker intervention and faster redeployment.

67. Oxfordshire FRS completed a wholetime recruitment process during the pandemic, following all government guidance on social distancing and hygiene. It used larger buildings and assessed fewer potential candidates each day. The process was recorded and shared via Facebook Workplace.

Next steps

68. 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, appearing to read 'M Parr', followed by a long horizontal stroke.

Matt Parr CB

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