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Rod Hammerton
Chief Fire Officer
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Councillor Eric Carter
Chair
Shropshire and Wrekin Fire and Rescue Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Hammerton and Cllr Carter,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: SHROPSHIRE 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 19 and 30 October 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

5. In relation to your service, the chair of the West Mercia Local Resilience Forum declared a major incident on 23 March 2020.

6. In summary, the service continued to respond to emergencies and carry out prevention activities in line with National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) guidance. However, it didn't provide the range of protection measures expected during the early stages of the pandemic. It took the

decision to stop all routine fire safety audits, contrary to guidance from the NFCC. It did provide other reactive protection activity.

7. The service has significant experience of major incidents and quickly put in place an effective command and control structure. It used its wholetime and on-call firefighters to respond to emergencies. Other staff, including on-call firefighters, distributed personal protective equipment (PPE) and helped with face fitting for masks.

8. The service's resources were well managed. Its financial position was largely unaffected and it did not have to use its reserves. It managed staff absence well and trained volunteers from across the service to provide resilience in its control room.

9. The service gave a high priority to the way it communicated with its staff. Throughout the pandemic it produced weekly bulletins covering a whole range of issues about how the pandemic is affecting the service. It also used virtual meeting platforms and webinars. The service enhanced its wellbeing support for staff throughout the pandemic. It supported on-call firefighters financially impacted by the pandemic. It promptly closed its headquarters to keep staff safe and was able to facilitate remote working for staff because it already had effective information technology (IT) in place. Staff said they felt well supported by the service throughout the pandemic.

10. We recognise that the arrangements for managing the pandemic may carry on for some time, and the service is now planning for the future. In order to be as efficient and effective as possible, Shropshire 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 what steps it needs to take to maintain its risk-based inspection programme. This should include what activity it can complete remotely and how to adapt its approach according to the restrictions in place at any one time.

(c) 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

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 levels of staff absence are greater than normal. These are the degradation arrangements. They cover prevention, protection, response and support functions. The service also created a business continuity group to consider ongoing governmental advice about COVID-19 and provided regular guidance to staff about issues such as social distancing, making premises 'COVID secure', remote working and supply of PPE.

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 other emergencies.

16. The service continued to provide its response and prevention functions throughout the pandemic in line with advice from the NFCC. But it did not provide the expected level of protection activity because it chose to put on hold its risk-based inspection programme to minimise contact between its staff and the public. It did review its definition of high-risk premises and carried out other reactive protection activities. It continued face-to-face prevention visits to its most vulnerable people who are at greatest risk of fire.

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 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 99.2 percent compared with 96.2 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 of being furloughed or being made redundant from their primary employment.

19. The service introduced different crewing models as a temporary measure during this period. These included changing the wholetime crew from five to four riders in a fire engine, with a fifth rider following behind in a separate vehicle, and reducing its on-call crew to five riders. This allowed firefighters to socially distance and therefore kept them and the public safe from increased transmission of the virus.

20. The service told us that its average response time to fires remained broadly the same during the pandemic compared with the same period in 2019. 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.

21. The service realised early on in the pandemic that it might not have enough staff for its control room. It addressed this by adapting its workforce plan, including training staff from across the service as call handlers to provide extra resilience. Ultimately, they weren't needed.

Prevention

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

23. The service stopped its routine programme of safe and well visits. It did this because it wanted to protect its communities from the COVID-19 pandemic and maintain the safety of its staff.

24. The service reviewed which individuals and groups it considered to be at an increased risk from fire. As a result of this it wrote to them explaining why safe and well visits were being postponed and asked them to contact the service if they needed advice or a smoke alarm. The service had to do this because it did not have the telephone numbers of these individuals on their database, an issue the service acknowledge is not satisfactory and is being reviewed.

25. The service then offered the option of a face-to-face home fire safety visit to those individuals who requested it. This was conducted by staff using suitable PPE.

26. The service introduced the option of having a smoke alarm delivered by post instead of a face-to-face visit.

Protection

27. 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 broadly adopted this guidance.

28. The service reviewed how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic. As a result, it confirmed that care homes and hospitals that have been adapted for COVID-19 patients are at increased risk from fire. The service contacted these premises and offered specific advice and guidance.

29. The service stopped conducting the fire safety audits that it would normally undertake. It decided to do this to minimise contact between its staff and the public. This meant that it didn't offer the full range of protection measures normally required of them.

30. The service continued to issue alteration notices, enforcement notices and prohibition notices, as required. It also continued responding to statutory building control consultations.

31. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as using telephone and email to make the initial contact with care homes and hospitals. It told us that resuming its risk-based inspection programme was a priority.

32. The level of protection activity during the period we inspected is less than we would expect and is not in line with national expectations.

Staff health and safety and wellbeing

33. 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.

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, peer support, trauma risk incident management, domestic abuse safeguarding, and access to external resources such as a network of staff supporters who provide counselling and mediation.

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. Staff were asked to self-identify as being at higher risk from COVID-19, rather than the service proactively engaging with them to establish whether they required additional support tailored to their individual needs. The service is now developing plans to provide greater support to these staff members.

36. The service made sure that firefighters were competent to do their work during the pandemic. The service had trained its firefighters in safety-critical competencies six months ahead of schedule, which meant this training was in date. They also kept up to date with most of the firefighter fitness requirements despite suspending their fitness programme for two months.

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 also provided a 24-hour call-out service for firefighters to have their PPE cleaned and decontaminated if necessary.

39. The service already had a good supply of PPE and needed very little extra provision throughout the pandemic. Because of this, the service considered it to be better value for money to continue with their local suppliers for any additional purchases.

Staff absence

40. Absences have increased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of shifts lost due to sickness absence increased by 42.8 percent between 1 April and 30 June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019.

41. The service didn't update its absence policy, but it provided additional guidance 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. 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 team meetings, webinars, bulletins and one-to-ones with a manager or equivalent about wellbeing and health and safety.

43. Most on-call firefighter survey respondents told us that they received more communication than usual during the pandemic. The service made use of email, social media, messaging services and virtual meeting platforms when communicating with on-call staff during COVID-19. It also made sure that on-call staff received the weekly bulletins.

44. The service intends to maintain changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19, including most of its virtual communication platforms. It is also likely to retain some remote and flexible working.

Working with others, and making changes locally

45. 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 additional support to its communities.

46. The service carried out new activities, which included delivering PPE across the county to local authorities and face fitting for masks to be used by NHS and clinical care workers. These activities were carried out by operational staff who were not wholtime firefighters. The demand for additional support from public service partners was low.

47. 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.

48. The service consulted locally with the FBU and the Fire and Rescue Service Association to implement the tripartite agreement. The service also involved UNISON in this process.

49. 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.

50. There was one extra request for work by a partner agency that fell outside the tripartite agreement. Shropshire Council identified that a number of people on their shielding list did not have a smoke alarm. With the individual's consent, their details were shared with the service and they were provided with a smoke alarm. The service is also offering everyone on the shielding list the option of a safe and well visit, either virtually or face-to-face, when it is safe to do so.

51. This work was agreed and undertaken on time and in line with the request from the partner agency.

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

53. Some of the activities were carried out by on-call staff who it had identified were suffering financial hardship as they had either been furloughed or made redundant from their primary employment. In line with NFCC guidance, these staff members received additional payment to do extra activities, including helping to distribute PPE.

54. All activities to support other organisations were monitored and reviewed.

Local resilience forum

55. 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). Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service is a member of the West Mercia LRF.

56. The service was an active member of the LRF during the pandemic. The LRF partnership is strong and its collaborative arrangements are regularly tested during major incidents, such as flooding. The service told us that the LRF's arrangements enabled the service to fully engage in the multi-agency response.

57. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the service occasionally chaired the strategic co-ordinating group. Other members of staff were actively involved in tactical co-ordinating groups to support the LRF. The service was able to allocate suitably qualified staff to participate in these groups without affecting its core duties.

58. The service provided additional support to Shropshire Council. It trained staff across NHS trusts and local authority housing groups in trauma risk incident management (TRiM). As a result, the council now has 120 TRiM practitioners who are able to provide specialist support to their frontline workers.

Use of resources

59. The service's financial position hasn't yet been significantly affected by the pandemic.
60. The service had made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. Up until June 2020, its main extra costs were PPE (£50,000), on-call firefighter costs (£38,000), and cleaning and decontamination (£28,000). It fully understands the effect this will have on its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings.
61. The service anticipates that it will have made some savings during this period through remote working, and reduced staff travel costs, fuel, subsistence and expenses.
62. The service received £445,000 of extra government funding to support its response. At the time of our inspection it had spent just over half of this money on wholetime contracts for on-call staff, overtime, PPE, and cleaning and decontamination of buildings. It has shown how it used this income efficiently, and that it mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period.
63. The service didn't use any of its reserves to meet the extra costs that arose during this period.
64. When used, overtime was managed appropriately. The service made sure that its staff who worked overtime had enough rest between shifts.

Ways of working

65. The service changed the way in which it operates during the pandemic. For example, it trained volunteers to be call handlers in the control room and it increased its on-call workforce to give extra support to its wholetime firefighters. It had the necessary IT to support remote working where appropriate.
66. 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.
67. Staff gave positive feedback about how senior leaders engaged with them 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.
68. 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

69. 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.

70. 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.

71. For most of the pandemic, the main role for wholetime and on-call firefighters was to respond to emergencies. Work under the tripartite agreement was done by other parts of the workforce, including a small number of on-call firefighters. This approach was taken because the service felt that this was the best way to make sure it had the resources it needed to meet its foreseeable risk.

72. The on-call workforce took on extra responsibilities covering some of the roles agreed as part of the tripartite agreement such as distributing PPE. In addition, twelve on-call staff were provided with fixed-term contracts to become wholetime firefighters. This provided extra cover for shifts of absent wholetime staff.

Governance of the service's response

73. 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.

74. The chair of Shropshire and Wrekin Fire and Rescue Authority 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.

75. The fire and rescue authority maintained effective ways of working with the service during the pandemic. The authority also continued to give the service proportionate oversight and scrutiny. It did this by regularly communicating with the chief fire officer and receiving the service's written briefings.

76. The fire and rescue authority continued to give its members relevant and regular information about how the service was responding to the pandemic. It made use of technology and held meetings virtually.

Looking to the future

77. 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.

78. Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service has continued to build on well-established, constructive relationships with its regional LRF. It has also maintained a strong and inclusive culture with its workforce throughout the pandemic. Its improved communication and ways of working have had a positive effect on staff wellbeing. The service benefited from its modern technology and was able to support remote working promptly and create virtual meeting platforms. It plans to continue with these new ways of working. The service has established a 'restoration of service group' to manage the return of its services to normal, and to consider whether they can be done in a more efficient and effective way. It will also maintain a pool of volunteers to provide resilience in the control room.

79. Good practice and what worked was shared with other services through the NFCC's weekly meetings with chief fire officers.

Next steps

80. 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,



Wendy Williams

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