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Chief Fire Officer
South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor Robert Taylor
Chair
South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Ms Johnson and Cllr Taylor,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: SOUTH YORKSHIRE 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, South Yorkshire Local Resilience Forum (LRF) declared a major incident on 17 March 2020.

6. In summary, the service adapted and responded to the pandemic effectively. It maintained its statutory functions and provided additional support to the community during the first phase of the pandemic. It used its wholetime firefighters to respond to emergencies and increased its on-call

workforce to provide extra support. Volunteers from across the service delivered essential food items and prescriptions to vulnerable people. Personal visits were made to the most vulnerable people by staff using personal protective equipment (PPE). This meant the people of South Yorkshire were well supported throughout the pandemic. Resources were well managed, and the service responded to several critical fires at the same time.

7. Its financial position was largely unaffected, and its reserves did not have to be used. The service managed staff absence well. It decontaminated its buildings and fire stations to reduce the risk of staff absence and to make staff feel safe. It trained volunteers from across the service to provide resilience in its control room.

8. It also communicated well with its staff, through virtual meeting platforms and podcasts. Good wellbeing support was provided to staff throughout the pandemic. The service promptly closed its headquarters and provided staff with extra IT to support remote-working arrangements. A notable achievement is the way in which the service supported its black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) staff, who are at higher risk from COVID-19. By introducing a personal risk assessment tool, it identified which staff were most vulnerable and provided them with extra wellbeing support.

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, South Yorkshire 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 wholetime firefighters are fully productive, while minimising the risk of them contracting the virus.

Preparing for the pandemic

10. In line with good governance, the service had pandemic flu and business continuity plans in place which were in date. These plans were activated.

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 hasn't yet reviewed its pandemic flu plan to reflect the changing situation and what it has learned during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has developed new plans which provide a more comprehensive and wide-ranging response to the pandemic.

13. 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 and supply of PPE.

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 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 attend emergencies. It has also continued to visit the most vulnerable people who are at the greatest risk of fire in the community, and the highest risk premises.

Response

16. 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.

17. 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 88.4 percent compared with 88.2 percent during the same period in 2019. We were told that this was as a result of an increased number of on-call firefighters being available to respond to emergencies because of being furloughed from their primary employment. This provided extra cover for wholetime firefighters whose sickness levels had increased due to some staff shielding.

18. The service also increased the availability of wholetime firefighters by using on-call staff on short-term wholetime contracts.

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

20. The service told us that their average response time to fires improved during the pandemic compared with the same period in 2019. This was due to several reasons, including better fire engine availability and a lower number of incidents requiring their attendance. 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 in the pandemic that due to staff shielding it didn't 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.

Prevention

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

23. The service conducted fewer home fire safety checks 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 of this, it continued to fit alarms and blanking plates to letter boxes of domestic abuse referrals who it identified as being at increased risk from fire. While all routine safe and well visits were stopped, the service continued to offer welfare checks and advice over the telephone.

24. The service decided to continue offering face-to-face home fire safety checks because it could give staff suitable PPE. This included visiting the elderly to spot fire hazards in the home and fit alarms.

25. As an alternative to a face-to-face home fire safety check, the service continued to offer the option of a home fire safety check by telephone. It contacted all its most vulnerable people who are at the greatest risk of fire in the community.

Protection

26. 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 includes carrying out audits on those premises that are at the greatest risk from fire. The service adopted this guidance.

27. The service reviewed how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic. As a result, it added schools, GP surgeries, shopping centres and supermarkets to its list of premises that are at increased risk from fire.

28. The service conducted fewer fire safety audits than normal. It decided to continue face-to-face fire safety audits because it could give staff suitable PPE. It introduced risk-based desktop appraisals as an alternative to face-to-face audits to minimise face-to-face contact between members of staff and the public.

29. The service was not required to issue any alteration notices, enforcement notices or prohibition notices. It continued responding to building control consultations.

30. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as completing more desktop assessments, sending and receiving still images and videos electronically, using video and WhatsApp, video conferencing, and replacing hard-copy letters with electronic documents.

31. The service has continued to engage with those responsible for fire safety in high-risk premises that have cladding like that at Grenfell Tower, particularly those where temporary evacuation procedures are in place.

Staff health and safety and wellbeing

32. Staff wellbeing was a clear priority for the service during the pandemic. It 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.

33. 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 specific guidance for all line managers. The service also has a health and wellbeing manager. The service has discussed with its staff how it should plan for the potential longer-term effects of COVID-19 on its workforce.

34. Staff most at risk from COVID-19 were identified effectively, including those from a BAME background and those with underlying health problems. The service worked with staff to develop and implement processes to manage the risk.

35. The service has introduced 'be well at work' guidance. This includes policies for staff about shielding, self-isolation, testing and bereavement. It consulted with its BAME staff support group about Public Health England's report on the impact of COVID-19 on BAME people, and what extra measures it should consider. It also introduced an individual personal risk assessment tool, which was completed by 150 members of staff. Staff have said that they felt well supported in terms of health, safety and wellbeing.

36. 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.

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 participated in a regional procurement scheme with Yorkshire and Humberside to procure PPE, which helped it to get good value for money.

Staff absence

39. Absences have decreased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of days or shifts lost due to sickness decreased by 24.7 percent between 1 April and 30 June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019.

40. 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. 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. The service told us that it has also seen a reduction in staff absence for special leave and staff with caring arrangements.

Staff engagement

41. Most staff survey respondents told us that the service did provide regular and relevant communication to all staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included regular virtual team meetings, daily bulletins and one-to-ones with a manager or equivalent member of staff about wellbeing and health and safety.
42. The service made use of WhatsApp, emails and virtual meeting platforms when communicating with on-call staff during the pandemic.
43. The service also used other methods to communicate with its staff, including video conferencing, podcasts and 'chat with the chief' sessions.
44. The service intends to make changes to its ways of working in response to COVID-19, including maintaining most of its virtual communication platforms as part of its usual processes. It is also likely to retain 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 other support to its communities.
46. The service carried out the following new activities: assisting vulnerable people, face fitting for masks, delivering PPE, delivering essential items (food and prescriptions), and gaining entry to premises where people were believed to be deceased or incapacitated by COVID-19. Firefighters were also trained to transport patients to a neighbouring Nightingale hospital and to move bodies, though this was not ultimately required.
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 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 work outside the tripartite agreement, the specifics would need to be agreed nationally before the work could begin.
48. The service consulted locally to implement the tripartite agreement with the FBU, Fire Officers' Association, UNISON and Unite.
49. Most of the new work done by the service under the tripartite agreement was agreed in time for it to start promptly and in line with the request from the partner agency.
50. Most of the tripartite activities were not carried out by wholetime firefighters. The service adopted this approach because it wanted to maintain enough resources to respond to

emergencies. The service used two on-call firefighters to provide training in face fitting for masks. It also trained wholtime firefighters to drive patients to a neighbouring Nightingale hospital and to move bodies, though this was not ultimately required.

51. The service also carried out an additional request from partner agencies which fell outside the tripartite agreement. It trained staff to gain entry to premises where people were believed to be deceased or incapacitated by COVID-19. This activity was carried out by staff who were not wholtime firefighters. This was because negotiations with the FBU at a national level, about members terms and conditions, were delaying the activity.

52. There is no doubt that the service found negotiations with the FBU about the tripartite agreement challenging. This was not helped by the influence of the national FBU on its local representatives to review members' pay and conditions. The service resolved this by using staff from across the workplace to carry out all its activities. It is good to hear that the service's relationship with the local FBU representatives remains good.

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

54. The service hasn't yet fully reviewed and evaluated its activities to support other organisations during this period. It hasn't identified which to continue.

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 LRF. South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service is a member of South Yorkshire LRF. It is also a member of a regional network of LRFs, including others in the Yorkshire and Humberside region.

56. The service was an active member of both local and regional LRFs during the pandemic. It chaired the local LRF on a regular basis. The service told us that the LRF's arrangements enabled the service to be fully engaged in the multi-agency response. The contribution by partner organisations and the service to support its communities is commendable. For example, the service worked extensively with the military to co-ordinate and distribute 1.5 million items of PPE.

Use of resources

57. The service's financial position hasn't yet been significantly affected by the pandemic.

58. The service has made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced for COVID-19. Up until 30 June 2020, its main extra costs were for overtime, PPE, cleaning and decontamination, and IT. It doesn't yet fully understand the effect this will have on its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings, not least because it responded to a number of critical incidents during the pandemic and at the time of our inspection had yet to reconcile its overtime costs.

59. The service anticipates that it will have made some savings during this period through remote working, and reduced staff travel costs and expenses.

60. The service received £1.3 million of extra government funding to support its response. At the time of our inspection it had spent almost all this money on overtime for staff, PPE, cleaning and decontamination of buildings, wholetime contracts for on-call staff, and IT. It has shown how it used this income efficiently.

61. The service didn't use any of its reserves to meet the additional costs that arose during this period.

62. When used, overtime was managed appropriately. The service took a flexible approach to this, choosing to pay overtime instead of giving staff time off in lieu. This approach will allow the service to manage staff absence and leave better in the future.

63. The service made sure that staff who worked overtime had enough rest between shifts.

Ways of working

64. The service changed how it operates during the pandemic. For example, it trained staff volunteers to be call handlers in the control room. It had the necessary IT to support remote working where appropriate. It brought forward its IT improvement strategy to provide extra licences and laptops for staff. It made sure that procurement processes achieved good value for money.

65. The service could quickly implement changes to how it operates. This allowed its staff to work flexibly and efficiently during the pandemic. It 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.

66. The senior leaders 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.

67. 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

68. 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.

69. 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.

70. For most of the pandemic, the main role of wholetime firefighters was to provide the service's core responsibilities, while work under the tripartite agreement was done by other parts of the workforce. We expect services to keep their processes under review to make sure they use their wholetime workforce as productively as possible.

71. This approach was taken because the service felt this was the best way to make sure that it had the resources it needed to meet its foreseeable risks. The service also wanted to maintain the health and safety of its wholetime firefighters.

72. The on-call workforce took on some extra responsibilities, which included providing training to NHS staff on how to properly fit face masks. The on-call workforce was also used to provide emergency response cover at wholetime fire stations.

73. A number of on-call staff were provided with short-term contracts to become wholetime firefighters. This provided extra cover for shifts of absent wholetime staff.

Governance of the service's response

74. 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, namely to set the service's priorities and budget and make sure that the budget is spent wisely.

75. Members of South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Authority were actively engaged in discussions with the chief fire officer and the service on the ability of the service to discharge its statutory functions during the pandemic.

76. The fire and rescue authority maintained some oversight of the service during the pandemic and was kept informed of decisions it made. The authority reduced its oversight because it recognised the critical nature of this incident, and the need for the chief fire officer to be able to quickly adapt the service's response to effectively support its staff and communities.

77. The service regularly updated fire and rescue authority members 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.

Looking to the future

78. 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.

79. South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service has improved its collaboration with other LRF responders, in particular the way in which information is now shared 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.

80. The service has transformed its use of technology to support remote working and to create virtual platforms. It plans to continue with these new ways of working to become more efficient and effective. The service will review how well it responded to the pandemic and add any lessons learned into its service's improvement plan. It will also maintain a pool of volunteers to provide more resilience in its control room.

81. Good practice and what worked was shared with other services through the NFCC. This includes the health and safety risk assessments which the service conducted for tripartite activities.

Next steps

82. This letter will be published on our website. We propose to restart our second round of effectiveness and efficiency fire and rescue inspections in spring 2021, when we will follow up some of our findings.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M Parr', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Matt Parr CB

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