

Foreword

This is my second annual report to the Secretary of State under section 28B of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004. It contains my assessment of the efficiency and effectiveness of fire and rescue services in England since my last report, published in January 2020. I report separately every year on the efficiency and effectiveness of police forces in England and Wales.

Coming to terms with COVID-19

The pandemic has affected everyone's way of life and how public and private services carry out their work. None of us could have imagined the many ways it has changed what we do and how we do it. Indeed, we are still learning about the longer-term effects of this pandemic on our communities.

Inspections of fire and rescue services are important, but they are usually not urgent. In March 2020, the HMICFRS Board made a series of decisions that included how best to provide support to fire and rescue services.

All inspections create administrative work for fire and rescue services. We always do everything we reasonably can to minimise this, but it can't be eliminated. Because of the extraordinary demands on services created by the pandemic, we decided to

suspend indefinitely all inspection work needing appreciable input.

Supporting services by redeploying staff

Effective inspections require teams with operational experience, so our workforce always includes experienced fire and rescue staff. They usually join us on temporary secondment from their home services.

To support services during the pandemic, we offered to agree any requests for seconded staff to return temporarily. As we anticipated, many requests followed. Most of our seconded fire staff returned to their home services, where their skills and experience were in particularly high demand. What staff were asked to do differed between services, but some did high-risk pandemic work including moving the deceased and helping deliver personal protective equipment (PPE) to healthcare staff. We also agreed requests from the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC).

We took an identical approach with our police secondees, allowing them to return to their home forces and the National Police Coordination Centre.

We made a similar decision to support the temporary redeployment of civil servants who work at HMICFRS. Many were redeployed to other parts of the Civil Service to support vital work managing the emergency response.

In total, almost a quarter of our staff were redeployed at some stage during the pandemic. I am immensely proud of the contribution made by each of them. In these extremely difficult and unusual circumstances, our staff have continued to work hard, support each other and display our values in everything they do.

Completing our first virtual inspections

Like every other organisation, we have had to adapt our work to meet mandatory restrictions and reduce transmission of the virus. We closed our three offices in March 2020. Since then, our staff have mainly worked at home. For the first time in our long history, we completed our first virtual inspections.

In these testing and difficult circumstances, I thank all our staff for their positive response to this change. We need to learn from our experiences to improve what we do, and so we are evaluating the benefits and consequences of this new approach.

Senior staffing changes

Responsibility for inspecting fire and rescue services and police forces is shared among Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMIs). Over the past year, two have left HMICFRS: Dru Sharpling and Phil Gormley. I thank both for their invaluable efforts while at the inspectorate and wish them both well in their new endeavours. Ms Sharpling will continue in her role as a panel

member of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. Mr Gormley becomes the new chief executive of East Anglia Children's Hospices, a charity that I know is very close to his heart.

HMI Sharpling will not be replaced. I am grateful to HMI Matt Parr for agreeing to take responsibility for her three fire and rescue services.

HMI Gormley's successor is Andrew Cooke, formerly chief constable of Merseyside. I extend to him the warmest welcome as he assumes his responsibilities for fire and rescue services and police forces in the Northern Region, as well as his national duties.

In the eight months between HMI Gormley's departure and HMI Cooke's arrival, responsibility for northern fire and rescue services and police forces was shared between HMIs Zoë Billingham, Matt Parr and Wendy Williams. I am very grateful to them all for agreeing to increase their workloads in that prolonged period.

Since my last report, our chief operating officer has also changed. In June 2020, Simon Peachey left the Civil Service to join the private sector. I thank him for his contribution. His successor, Mark Byers, joined us in November 2020.

The report's structure and purpose

Suspending our inspections has affected our work and limits what I can say in this assessment.

Part 1 contains my assessment of the state of fire and rescue services in England. In making my assessment, I have drawn on the inspections we have carried out this year. These include the Home Secretary's commissions to assess how fire and rescue services are responding to the pandemic, and how the London Fire Brigade is responding to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry's Phase 1 recommendations. They also include our work to consider how services are responding to the causes of concern we gave in Round 1 of our fire and rescue service inspections.

I have also used the findings and reports of other organisations, and other information and analysis available to me.

Part 2 is an overview of the findings from the inspection activity we completed during 2020.

Part 3 sets out the full list of our fire and rescue publications in the period covered by this report.

When compiling this assessment, I wrote to chief fire officers and other interested parties throughout the fire and rescue sector, inviting them to contribute their views on the state of fire and rescue in England. I put on record my warmest thanks to all those who responded for their very thoughtful and insightful contributions. They have been a great help in producing this report.

Our approach to inspecting fire and rescue services

In February 2020, following a public consultation, the Home Secretary approved our fire and rescue inspection programme for the second round of our service inspections. The programme was designed to replicate Round 1 of our inspections as much as possible. We did this to assess the improvements services are making, covering effectiveness, efficiency and people.

With support from our expert reference and technical advisory groups, we made some improvements to our inspection methodology. In particular, we made improvements to how we look at risk, protection, and equality and diversity. We have just restarted this inspection, inspecting and grading every service during the next 18 months.

I continue to be grateful for the support, challenge and advice provided to us from the fire sector. When we took on responsibility for fire inspection in 2017, we made a promise to work with the sector to design and develop our approach, something we continue to do.

I also put on record my thanks to several people. Thanks to Roy Wilsher, who shortly steps down as chair of the NFCC. Roy has been a great support to the inspectorate and provided us with excellent insight, advice and challenge throughout the design and implementation of our inspection work. As the Council's

first chair, he can look back with great pride at his achievements in building the NFCC and ensuring its place at the centre of the sector. I wish him well and look forward to working with his successor, Mark Hardingham.

I also thank HMI Zoë Billingham for her continued leadership of our fire and rescue inspection activity and her engagement with the fire sector.

Finally, I thank our staff, who continue to work hard in testing circumstances to promote improvements in fire and rescue services. We have had a large turnover of staff over the past year as secondments have come to an end and new ones begin. Each and every member of staff works with the utmost dedication and professionalism. I remain very grateful to everyone at HMICFRS for all they do.

Sir Thomas P Winsor

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Fire and Rescue Services