

Part 1: Overview

This year's report begins with my assessment of the state of the fire and rescue sector in England in the past year, a year dominated by the pandemic.

National reform remains necessary and needs to accelerate

In my last assessment, I concluded that the fire and rescue sector had many areas of strength and good practice, but significant reform was needed. It still is.

I made several national recommendations. Later in this assessment, I discuss the progress that has been made to implement these recommendations. Services have risen to the challenge of the pandemic and continue to make important changes. But I hoped more progress would have been made to remedy the national problems. I recognise the significant effect the pandemic has had on the sector and this work.

There remains a case for reform

Since my last report, the sector continues to respond to a broad range of emergencies with commendable skill and professionalism. Services remain committed to protecting local communities, and staff are willing to work with others to achieve this.

But it is a sector that needs local and national reform, with barriers impeding the efficiency and effectiveness of services. We have just inspected how every service is responding to the pandemic. While there is much services can be proud of, these barriers remain.

There is also considerable financial disparity between services. Some are well funded while others struggle to afford the number of staff they need. We found flaws in how services ensure that the people responsible comply with fire safety regulations.

Some progress is being made

This is not a sector that is standing still. It has been over three and a half years since the terrible tragedy at Grenfell Tower, and the sector is still learning and taking steps to ensure that nothing like this can ever happen again.

I am sure our first reports made difficult reading for some, so it is encouraging to see services are responding constructively to our findings.

At the time of writing, the Home Office is finalising a further reform programme, which has the potential to improve services. This is necessary. I look forward to seeing the detail and I hope progress is swift.

The Home Office is also considering changes to fire governance in England through its review of police and crime commissioners.

Work continues to implement the Government's existing reform programme. Measures in the Fire Safety Bill and draft Building Safety Bill should improve services' protection work, although more work is needed to determine how they will be implemented. The Government has given services significant long-term additional funding. This includes investing in a programme to assess or audit every high-rise residential building in England by December 2021, and the NFCC's work to manage all high-rise residential buildings with aluminium composite material cladding to ensure fire safety. The NFCC is leading central programmes of work covering areas including leadership, people, digital, data and risk. This work should radically improve what the sector does and how it works.

The reaction to my first assessment was broadly positive, with many responding constructively to my conclusions. Independent, expert and objective inspection in the public interest, under statutory authority and according to non-political criteria, is essential for public confidence in the efficiency and effectiveness of the fire and rescue sector.

Safety-critical, essential public services benefit from the scrutiny of inspection and reporting. Elected representatives who carry the ultimate responsibility for public safety have a great need for this scrutiny. Evidence-based, thorough analysis and assessment of performance, arrived at in fair

processes, is the right of every public service. It is part of the right to be treated fairly and to have rational, proportionate and procedurally sound decisions made. These are our standards and our commitment.

Our national recommendations need to get done faster

So far, we have made six national recommendations. These cover major structural aspects:

- the Home Office should precisely determine the role of fire and rescue services, to remove any ambiguity;
- the sector should remove unjustifiable variation, including in how they define risk;
- the sector should review and reform how effectively pay and conditions are determined;
- the Home Office should invest chief fire officers with operational independence, whether through primary legislation or in some other manner;
- there should be a code of ethics; and
- the Home Office should ensure that the sector has sufficient capacity and capability to bring about change.

In July 2020, I convened a meeting with named bodies (the Home Office, the NFCC, the Local Government Association and National Employers) to consider progress, aware that the pandemic had affected this work. While encouraging progress has been made

in relation to some of these recommendations, in others, work is still in its infancy, or hasn't begun.

I proposed new dates for these recommendations. In some cases, I have aligned these dates with the work that I know is underway. In others, I have considered work that will affect completion, such as the Home Office's police and crime commissioner review and forthcoming fire reform programme.

I received comprehensive responses from each named body. These responses have allowed me to establish new completion dates for some of the recommendations. While Home Office ministers recognise the importance and persuasiveness of our recommendations, an implementation plan remains outstanding. I hope an announcement is imminent. I know the Home Office and the wider fire sector have discussed what should be done.

The new dates are:

Recommendation	Original date	Proposed new date
1: As soon as is practicable the Home Office, National Fire Chiefs Council and Local Government Association, in consultation with the Fire Standards Board and Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, should	Dec 2020	Dec 2021

Recommendation	Original date	Proposed new date
<p>establish a programme of work that will result in consistency in the four priority areas (1. identifying and determining risk as part of the IRMP process; 2. identifying and measuring emergency response standards and approaches; 3. defining what are high-risk premises for the purposes of fire protection; and 4. setting an expectation for how frequently high-risk premises, and parts of those premises, should be audited for compliance with fire safety legislation).</p> <p>There should be completion or significant progress in the four priority areas specified above, towards a common set of definitions and standards for fire and rescue services to adopt and apply as soon as reasonably practicable, for each of the four priority areas.</p>		

Recommendation	Original date	Proposed new date
2: As part of the next Spending Review, the Home Office in consultation with the Fire and Rescue Sector should address the deficit in the fire sector's national capacity and capability to support change.	Next spending review	Complete
3: The Home Office, in consultation with the fire and rescue sector, should review and with precision determine the roles of: (a) fire and rescue services; and (b) those who work in them.	Jun 2020	Awaiting fire reform implementation plan from Home Office
4: The Home Office, the Local Government Association, the National Fire Chiefs Council and trade unions should consider whether the current pay negotiation machinery requires fundamental reform. If so, this should include the need for an independent pay review body and the future of the 'Grey Book'.	Jun 2020	Jun 2021

Recommendation	Original date	Proposed new date
<p>5: The Home Office should consider the case for legislating to give chief fire officers operational independence. In the meantime, it should issue clear guidance, possibly through an amendment to the Fire and Rescue National Framework for England, on the demarcation between those responsible for governance and operational decision making by the chief fire officer.</p>	<p>Sep 2020</p>	<p>Awaiting fire reform implementation plan from Home Office</p>
<p>6: The National Fire Chiefs Council, with the Local Government Association, should produce a code of ethics for fire and rescue services. The code should be adopted by every service in England and considered as part of each employee's progression and annual performance appraisal.</p>	<p>Dec 2020</p>	<p>Mar 2021</p>

Each of these recommendations remains live and relevant. Local reform is underway, but the sector needs clear national direction and to start again in

many areas. In some cases, services continue to work with different and inconsistent governance arrangements. They operate in varying ways, some with insufficient money and people, and face different barriers preventing reform. The sector needs fundamental reform.

Services need clarity on what they are required to do. I know this is being considered by the Home Office. But there needs to be greater clarity on activities such as co-responding (supporting the ambulance service), responding to floods, responding to terrorist attacks and wider public safety. This clarity cannot come soon enough. When fire and rescue staff have the appropriate training and skills, there should be no question that they support life-saving activities.

The National Joint Council (NJC) (the mechanism for agreeing pay and workforce terms and conditions) is failing firefighters and the public, and is in urgent need of reform.

Consideration also needs to be given as to whether it is right that these arrangements cover the whole of the UK. Fire is a devolved matter. I am unconvinced that a UK-wide body can provide the flexibility needed to protect the best interests of staff and services across the UK. For example, while the Home Office is considering the role of fire services in England, the Scottish Government has already tried – unsuccessfully – to agree with the NJC an enlargement of what firefighters do. This was to include providing more

support to their communities, including the most vulnerable.

The 'Grey Book' (the document that lists firefighters' terms and conditions) has not been updated since 2009. Terms and conditions are rigid, leaving little room for services to adapt quickly and provide firefighters with necessary flexibility. They also inhibit firefighters from providing additional support to their communities in ways they think necessary. Role maps were originally created to list general areas of competence. They are now being used as an exclusive list of what firefighters and control room staff can do.

The basic pay structure, in which firefighters can only move between 'trainee' and 'competent' in most roles, leaves no room to recognise performance. It offers limited opportunities to link pay to progression.

The rationale of NJC decisions on roles, especially those about pay, are opaque and should be open for all to see and understand. In these ways and others, the Grey Book, and the way it is interpreted and applied, is a barrier to change and improvement. A national approach is needed to find a model that provides appropriate terms and conditions. It must also allow for local variation and flexibility.

I know there are some who believe that the current arrangements are effective. But these views are in the minority and, at the very least, these arrangements need to be properly reviewed.

No progress has yet been made by the Home Office towards giving chief fire officers operational independence. Decisions on using resources to meet commitments in integrated risk management plans – as well as during emergencies such as a pandemic – should be for each chief fire officer to make. This would make them fully accountable for the effectiveness of their services' performance against the priorities set by fire and rescue authorities.

The activities associated with each firefighter role are listed in the role maps. Their prescriptive nature isn't helpful. Chief fire officers face resistance to varying degrees when asking their firefighters to undertake other tasks. During the pandemic, chiefs couldn't require firefighters to do something to protect their communities if it wasn't listed in the role maps. This necessitated the tripartite agreement, which I discuss later. This was a source of frustration for the many public-spirited firefighters who wanted to provide support to the communities they serve at a time of great need.

Leaders of emergency services shouldn't face these restrictions on how they use their staff. I recognise that the governance landscape in fire and rescue may change, not least following the forthcoming conclusions of the Home Office's police and crime commissioner review. But this needs to be resolved now rather than wait for several years after any governance changes have – or haven't – been made.

These matters of pay and responsibility need to be resolved.

Some national activity is underway

I have decided not to make any more national recommendations at this point. I believe it is more important for the sector to act sufficiently on the recommendations I have already made, which are about fundamental reform. We expect a further programme of reform to be announced by the Home Office shortly.

I recognise that some work is underway. I acknowledge the work of the NFCC, Local Government Association, National Employers, Government and others to reform the fire sector. But I remain impatient on behalf of the public, who could be better served.

During our first round of inspections, we were concerned by the quality of integrated risk management plans. The quality differed hugely and some lacked sufficient clarity. For example, the average time taken for a fire engine to attend an emergency can be measured differently from service to service, and there is no commonly accepted standard to measure risk.

The sector is responding to these concerns through the NFCC's community risk programme. I look forward to seeing the results of this work.

The Fire Standards Board is publishing a benchmarking framework that services should follow when compiling

their integrated risk management plans. However, while this work will enable services to take a similar approach and provide more clarity and assurance to the public, at the time of writing it hasn't yet been completed.

As our recommendations from Round 1 confirm, it is essential that services have a common understanding of the risks and threats they must mitigate in their areas. They also need a common approach to matching that risk to clear response standards.

In our first inspections, our work in relation to how services treat their staff led to the lowest grades. In response, the NFCC is undertaking a range of work on areas such as recruitment, leadership, equality, diversity and inclusion, flexible working, succession planning, wellbeing, absence management and career progression. As this work develops, the main challenge will be ensuring that services accept its importance and put recommendations into practice. It is also important that progress is monitored to establish what works and where more attention is needed.

In my last assessment, I recommended a national code of ethics to improve the culture in services. I welcome the work to produce this code. Once finalised, service leaders must ensure that it is followed. It needs to be central to every decision, action and policy.

The sector's response to the pandemic has been affected by structural problems already addressed by our national recommendations. National reform needs to be accelerated. But I also recognise the positive

response most services have had to their first inspections. They are making improvements. I have seen how services have acted on the areas for improvement we established in Round 1, and how this meant that they were better able to cope with the pandemic.

The future challenge for the sector will be ensuring that services adopt best practice and apply our recommendations and findings in ways that are sensitive to and match local priorities.

Services rose to the challenge of COVID-19

We have just finished inspecting every service to consider how they responded to the first phase of the pandemic. The main findings are below, with more detail in Part 2. We have published a national report ([*Responding to the Pandemic*](#)) with our findings, as well as a short report on what each service did.

Like most other organisations, while a pandemic was on everyone's risk register, none anticipated what actually happened in 2020.

We saw services rise to the challenge, adapting to respond to emergency calls and providing additional support to their communities. In general, the continuity measures put in place worked. Staff absence levels were generally low during the first phase of the pandemic.

Variation was seen across the country

During our first round of inspections, we found considerable variation across services. This is still the case. Every service had planned for a flu pandemic differently. Some had bespoke plans that anticipated many problems. Others only had generic absence policies, some of which weren't activated because planned-for absence levels had not materialised at the time we inspected.

All the services implemented new ways of working, harnessing technology not previously used by services to enable more remote working. In most services, the pandemic was an opportunity to make more use of digital technology. This should help services address some of the challenges they face in recruiting and retaining a more diverse workforce. For example, more flexible working would allow people to manage caring responsibilities while getting their work done.

We saw services develop and strengthen local, regional and national working relationships. Services played a leading role in Local Resilience Forums and, without exception, were recognised and thanked for the work they did. A number of services led activity.

In line with the NFCC's advice, services were encouraged to reduce what they did in person, and to do more virtual prevention and protection work. They focused on people and premises at the highest risk. Implementation varied across services.

Some services adapted well to this change: they continued to carry out statutory duties, but in new ways. They also continued to support vulnerable people and enforce fire regulations. Others didn't adapt as well. A small number of services stopped either prevention or protection activity altogether to redeploy staff.

Services took decisions early in the pandemic with the best intentions, not knowing what the future held. While some services continued to review their approaches in line with changes in advice, others didn't. Indeed, in a few services it wasn't until months after the initial lockdown was lifted that they adapted their approaches to be consistent with the new restrictions.

The wider economic consequences of the pandemic will affect services' financial positions. Government grants have so far covered additional expenditure, but income is likely to fall in the future. For example, businesses closing will reduce business rates and therefore the funding available to services. This may have a disproportionate adverse effect on some services more than others. The Government will need to pay close attention to ensure that services continue to have the funding they need to meet their anticipated risk.

Services provided a range of support to their communities

Throughout the pandemic, fire staff worked exceptionally hard to help their communities in different ways.

There was a willingness to help and a can-do attitude from staff. Over a third of the 6,075 respondents to our COVID-19 staff survey, who had the opportunity to volunteer to carry out additional roles, did so. But unfortunately, how this willingness translated into action varied considerably. Every staff group – whether wholetime firefighters, on-call firefighters, prevention and protection teams or non-operational staff – did valuable extra work. I pay particular tribute to all fire staff who did this.

For firefighters, the tripartite agreement – signed by the NFCC, National Employers and the Fire Brigades Union – helped achieve this in part. This national agreement allowed firefighters to undertake additional roles outside their normal responsibilities.

In December 2020, a further agreement was reached, but this time without the NFCC. The agreement was solely between National Employers and the Fire Brigades Union under the NJC. This strengthened the Fire Brigades Union's hold on the sector, and made it more difficult for the NFCC to ensure that operational factors were fully considered in relation to additional pandemic activities.

The agreement was time-limited. Several extensions were agreed, but the agreement ended in January 2021 after negotiations between National Employers and the Fire Brigades Union to extend it broke down due to disagreement over health and safety arrangements. No national agreement was ever reached for fire

staff to support the national vaccination programme. This caused difficulties for fire and rescue services, especially given that the Fire Brigades Union asked its members not to volunteer for new work – including the vaccination programme – until it could be agreed nationally. This demonstrates how delicate and impractical arrangements were during the pandemic. It is encouraging to see that, despite no national agreement, over half the services have since agreed locally to support the vaccination programme, including fire staff administering the vaccine. During a time of great national need, the support these services are providing the National Health Service (NHS) should be applauded.

The tripartite agreement was a pragmatic way to get additional work agreed during the pandemic, considering the significant impediments that the current industrial relations apparatus suffers from. In some services, it got more work done. But in others, it became a hindrance. I question why, in a public health emergency, a contract of this kind was even necessary. The sector had capacity to help, and strong systems in place to protect staff and enable them to take action. This should have been enough.

This agreement became too prescriptive. It laid down tight rules about what firefighters should and shouldn't do. It provided little flexibility. As services faced different demands, additional agreements were insisted upon, each taking considerable time

to negotiate. By December 2020, 15 agreements had been published. Firefighters were able to deliver food to the most vulnerable people, but they couldn't do wellbeing checks on them unless a further agreement was signed.

An agreement was reached for firefighters to drive ambulances under blue lights (with sirens), but the agreement didn't initially cover driving without blue lights. Much to the frustration of some firefighters, the need for further local consultation slowed down the pace of support firefighters were to provide. A request to support the national test and trace scheme wasn't agreed for several months. This was a source of annoyance for everyone involved. It often took a number of weeks between requesting additional work and it starting.

If the necessary health and safety and local arrangements are in place, chief fire officers should be free to decide how they use their workforces. During the pandemic, the approach taken by the Fire Brigades Union (which represents mainly operational staff) differed from other unions, including those representing operational staff such as the Fire Officers Association and the Fire and Rescue Services Association. They took a much more enabling approach, so their members could undertake additional responsibilities. UNISON (which represents non-operational staff, normally working on things such as looking after corporate affairs, and prevention and protection) agreed

a much broader scope to collaborate. Their members did extra work such as delivering food and PPE to vulnerable people and carrying out wellbeing checks.

Some wholetime firefighters did take on extra responsibilities. However, many wanted to do more. Services limited many wholetime firefighters to fire stations to ensure that they were available for emergencies and to reduce the chances of contracting the virus. Demand for emergency response was down and firefighters couldn't do much normal prevention, protection and community engagement work.

While these firefighters could have done more, they were either prevented from doing so by their services or weren't given the right technology.

We recognise that, in the early days of the pandemic, concerns about firefighters going down with COVID-19 meant that ensuring firefighters could still respond to emergencies was the highest priority for services. But as more was known about the virus and restrictions changed, firefighters could have been used more efficiently.

In about half the services, on-call firefighters and other staff carried out additional activities. A large number of on-call firefighters were furloughed from their main employment and so they were available to help.

Although bound by the tripartite agreement, services were able to use them more flexibly than wholetime firefighters. This meant that fire and rescue services could use them, and other fire and rescue staff, quickly

to begin work without waiting for negotiations under the tripartite agreement to be completed. It allowed wholetime firefighters to stay in their fire stations, ready to respond to emergency calls.

There is much to be learned from the added value services provided during the pandemic. National leaders, including National Employers and those responsible for governance of services, should take a careful look at whether in reality services deployed staff with the right skill sets for what they had to do. In some services, deployment decisions were influenced by other factors, including the Fire Brigades Union holding them back.

Fire and building safety is changing a lot

I welcome the greater focus by the Government and the sector to improve fire and building safety.

In every profession, some events have a profound effect and fundamentally change practices and procedures. In policing, these events include the Hillsborough Stadium disaster in 1989 and the Macpherson report a decade later following the murder of Stephen Lawrence. Last year, HMI Wendy Williams published a report identifying the lessons the Home Office must learn from the Windrush scandal.

The fire sector has had similar profound moments. One of the greatest was the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017

in which 72 people died. Firefighters responded on the night with determination, dedication, courage and commitment. Staff in control responded with equal professionalism in the most difficult of circumstances.

Since the first phase of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry, we have published our first set of inspection reports and Dame Judith Hackitt has published her review into fire and building safety. It said fundamental reform is needed.

Implementing the Grenfell recommendations

Phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry investigated the cause of the fire, how it spread and the response of the London Fire Brigade and other emergency services. The inquiry reported in October 2019 and made a series of recommendations.

These included:

- ensuring that services have information and plans for fires in high-rise buildings;
- improving understanding of how different construction materials for high-rise buildings behave in fires;
- ensuring effective communications between emergency control rooms and incident commanders;
- analysing how control rooms handle emergency calls and tell people how to maximise their chances of surviving fires;
- assessing the competence of command and control;

- improving the fire safety of similar buildings; and
- improving how emergency services work together.

Three and a half years after the Grenfell Tower fire, there are still too many high-rise buildings that have similar cladding. Nearly 300 buildings have been made safer by replacing cladding, and the Government has provided over £1 billion for renovations. But this work has been going too slowly. Residents need to be safe in their homes.

In August 2020, we were commissioned by the Home Secretary to assess how the London Fire Brigade was dealing with the inquiry's recommendations. While the inquiry made 46 recommendations, our focus was on the 29 relevant to the London Fire Brigade. We published our findings in February 2021. More detailed findings are included in Part 2 of this assessment.

We recognise the progress the London Fire Brigade is making to implement the recommendations, especially over the past year. However, there is significant work still to do. By the end of 2020, only four recommendations had been implemented.

It was clear that implementing these considerable changes is a priority for the brigade's leadership. Staff we interviewed demonstrated the same determination to improve.

The inquiry wasn't about the London Fire Brigade alone. We were pleased to see work underway with

London's other emergency services, as well as the national fire sector, to ensure that the failings established by the inquiry are not repeated.

Phase 2 of the inquiry is underway and examines the causes of the fire. This includes how Grenfell Tower came to be in a condition that allowed the fire to spread in the way it did. While there is much more evidence to be heard, I have been surprised by some given so far. I await the inquiry's findings on whether the building and fire regulatory systems worked as they should.

Turning back to our inspection, we recognise the amount of work underway. The 29 recommendations we examined are being implemented. For example, the brigade is now collecting better risk information on premises. This information should enable a more effective response. This will be further improved when legislative changes requiring owners and managers of high-rise buildings to provide further building information become law.

The London Fire Brigade has designed new working practices covering firefighting in high-rise buildings, evacuations, and how fire survival calls from residents should be handled. These will be implemented in the coming months. Staff training is underway although, at the time of our inspection, practical exercises needed to be arranged so staff can get to grips with the new procedures and become proficient in their use. This will take some time to achieve, as will improving the training of all incident commanders.

Specialist staff have been trained to understand the risks posed by certain materials used in high-rise building construction. When responding to the fire at Grenfell Tower, firefighters didn't know exactly what they were dealing with. This is why they didn't expect the fire to behave as it did. If dangerous construction materials are not used, catastrophes like this would be far less likely. In any case, it is helpful that the brigade is now better prepared.

Finally, there is to be a new system to manage large numbers of fire safety guidance calls. During the fire, the brigade struggled to deal with the high number of calls it received from trapped residents. These new arrangements should ensure that the brigade is able to answer them and provide appropriate – and current – fire safety advice as necessary. This will save lives.

There is still much work to do. The brigade needs better project management arrangements for this work, including more consistent ways of monitoring progress, managing risks, understanding and ensuring that things work well together, and checking that they do. The brigade is getting on with this.

Londoners can be assured that their fire service is learning the lessons from the appalling tragedy at Grenfell Tower. Improvements are being made, but the brigade still has much more to do. I hope the other more systemic failings that the inquiry is now assessing can also be rapidly identified and put right.

The new building safety regulator

Dame Judith Hackitt recommended fundamental changes to the building regulation system. The Building Safety Bill is now before Parliament. Its main purpose is to create a new regulator.

The new regulator will be part of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and responsible for ensuring the fire safety of high-rise and other designated high-risk premises, from beginning to end. We have started discussions with the HSE to understand their work, consider how we can incorporate this in our inspection regime for fire services, and agree how we will work together.

Regulation confused is safety denied. For the new regulator to succeed, it is vital that everyone knows what they have to do, and how they will be accountable for it. And the relationship between regulator and regulated needs to be sound and fully effective.

In Round 1 of our inspections, we said that a number of services didn't have enough appropriately trained protection specialists. The Government has provided additional funding to recruit and train extra staff.

But it takes time for staff to be appropriately trained, and at present there is only a small pool of qualified people. However, the number of protection staff has increased by 5 percent to 758 since 2018/19. Services, the private sector and the new regulator all need them, so a co-ordinated approach is required to

increase their numbers. Otherwise, there will not be enough professionals available and public safety will suffer.

The sector has underinvested in protection for many years. The number of suitably qualified staff with the necessary experience and expertise in enforcement and prosecution has reduced by almost 10 percent over the past decade.

There is no common approach about what constitutes a high-risk building. Some services appear too reluctant to enforce and prosecute when appropriate. We welcome the publication of a professional standards framework, which explains how services should enable staff to develop careers in protection and get essential qualifications and experience.

Too often, different departments in services don't work well enough together to share information. In our second round of inspections, we will consider this further. We will also assess how services are managing their high-risk premises and how they adapt their response plans to the risk information they have. This was a significant finding from the Grenfell Tower Inquiry, and a point on which fire services need to improve.

Compared with the corresponding period in 2019, fire safety audits, enforcement activity and prosecutions have fallen in the quarter since pandemic restrictions were put in place in March 2020. But we are encouraged that most services have introduced

risk-based desktop inspections, and intend to re-introduce on-site inspections with appropriate pandemic measures as soon as possible. Most services continued to undertake the most essential face-to-face activities while maintaining staff and public safety. During our next round of inspections, we will pay close attention to how services are managing the backlog caused by the pandemic. We will pay even closer attention to those who didn't follow NFCC guidance on how to adapt protection work during the pandemic.

Diversity and equality in the sector must be improved

Events over the past year have highlighted the injustices experienced by black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) people, and the sometimes catastrophic consequences.

There continues to be a woeful lack of gender and race diversity in fire and rescue services. Minority groups still feel excluded from entering the sector or progressing due to cultural barriers. Figures from March 2020 show that only 17.3 percent of the 44,595 staff in fire and rescue services were female. Only 5.1 percent of staff were from a minority ethnic group, and the percentage of black firefighters is even lower, although there has been some slight recent improvement.

There is also a lack of employees from a BAME background at middle or senior levels. This is not

helped by a culture where fire and rescue services tend to promote from within at all levels. This leaves very little opportunity to improve diversity. Not a single service is anywhere near having a workforce representative of its community. This must be tackled. I hope the work now underway by services and the sector successfully addresses this.

In our first round of inspections, we established that there were serious cultural problems in a few services. BAME firefighters described how they cannot be themselves in the workplace. They have suffered discrimination, are reluctant to access the leadership or career development programmes on offer, and suffer negative bias, unconscious or otherwise. This is entirely unacceptable; everyone deserves to be treated fairly. Action needs to be focused on both understanding and addressing these problems. Women experience similar barriers and discrimination.

Recent evidence from Public Health England (PHE) found that, due to various social and economic factors, there is an association between belonging to some ethnic groups and a higher likelihood of testing positive and dying with COVID-19. Our COVID-19 inspections found that two-thirds of staff who may be more vulnerable to the virus, including BAME staff, were identified effectively. However, more needs to be done in other services to ensure that they are aware of PHE guidance and have the necessary provisions available to support BAME staff to improve their health

and wellbeing. To achieve this, it is important to have strategies and arrangements in place to create a healthy and supportive workplace with zero tolerance of discrimination. This should encourage minority ethnic staff to raise any concerns they have.

For any changes to be sustainable, there needs to be a culture where all staff feel safe to talk about race, and are confident to address injustices and challenge negative behaviour. Too often, discussions about race, inclusion and inequality are left to those most affected by it. Services need to better educate all their staff on the importance of diversity and inclusion, and to take a zero-tolerance approach to bullying, harassment and discrimination. This needs to be more than an e-learning course.

We will consider how inclusive watches are.

Watches are common across services and a long-standing tradition. They are considered families by some, but they can exclude others. New members feel compelled to change to be accepted.

Diversity and equality are important at all levels of the service. The sector should focus on improving diversity and equality in leadership roles.

Without improved representation throughout the workforce, cultural and equality barriers will still exist, and the service won't gain from the benefits of diversity.

According to the staff survey carried out during our first round of inspections, 33.2 percent of 196 BAME respondents reported feeling bullied and

harassed in the past 12 months (against 22.5 percent of white respondents). Also, 33.2 percent of BAME respondents reported feeling discriminated against at work in the past 12 months. Again, this was significantly higher than the percentage of white respondents (20.4 percent).

All public sector organisations have a legal obligation to deal effectively with bullying, harassment and discrimination: as far as possible to prevent it, and to tackle it properly when it happens. This includes fostering good relations between those who have protected characteristics (as defined in the Equality Act 2010) and those who don't. Fire and rescue services are no different. Services should be sure that they discharge this duty in everything they do. This includes by effectively carrying out equality impact assessments.

Diversity is always of great value. The highest standards are achieved when people from all parts of the community can be recruited and retained. Shallow pools never provide the available depths and breadths of skill, expertise and industry, and that harms the public interest. It is up to strong national and local leadership to ensure that the best people, from wherever they can be found, come into, stay in and develop their careers inside the fire and rescue service.

Values and cultures, working practices, acceptance and development of people are all enhanced when everyone is asked to, and does, contribute their best, irrespective of anything but their own qualities.

That means the culture in the fire and rescue sector needs to change considerably. This needs action at the national level, and commitment and practical effective steps locally. I am pleased that the NFCC has published its inclusion strategy and introduced an online platform to disseminate information and best practice. I urge services to use this resource at once, and to take up the invaluable support and expertise provided to the sector by groups such as the Asian Fire and Rescue Association and Women in the Fire Service UK.

In matters of inequality and fair treatment of people, fire services should learn from others. For example, NHS Employers has equality and diversity action plans. Through these plans, it considers the latest developments both within and outside the NHS to improve how staff are treated and developed, and how well it deals with the people who use its services.

Our next inspections will assess services' approach to race and inequality. When we inspect, fire staff should be open with us about how they are treated. We have a confidential reporting line for staff to report problems if they don't want to be identified. Lack of diversity and equality is a conspicuous failure of fairness that shames the sector.

We will assess what services are doing to improve their lack of diversity and equality. We will find out how they are tackling and eliminating discrimination at every level, and how they are educating their workforces to develop cultures that welcome difference and get the

best out of people. We will also consider how services are engaging with their diverse communities and responding to their needs. Fire and rescue services need to ensure that their workforces are as diverse and talented as possible. Without embracing the importance of equality, diversity and inclusion, they will not be able to provide an effective and efficient service for everyone.

The importance of on-call firefighters

In my last assessment, while recognising the tremendous dedication of on-call firefighters, I said the model needs attention to make sure that it is more sustainable and works well.

Over a third of all firefighters are on-call. The pandemic brought into higher focus the very great value of on-call firefighters in communities.

The pandemic has changed working lives, with more people working from home and fewer commuting. Services now have an opportunity to recruit from this pool. I hope the Government and the fire sector can capitalise on this opportunity.

The on-call workforce demonstrated its value even more than usual during the pandemic. Staff carried out a range of tasks from covering wholetime absences to taking on additional responsibilities.

Before the pandemic, the availability of on-call staff was a problem for many services. Often, they had too few

staff available during the working week; some fire engines crewed by on-call firefighters were unavailable for long periods. This changed during the pandemic. Services told us that many on-call firefighters were furloughed from work or were working from home. As a result, most services recorded higher availability than normal. Of the 44 services that provided comparable data, all had either increased or maintained their average availability from 1 April to 30 June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019. Overall, availability increased by 8.4 percent during this period.

Improvements are needed to address the long-term problems in recruiting and retaining on-call firefighters.

Data from March 2020 shows that there were 12,498 on-call firefighters in England. This was the second year the number of on-call firefighters didn't fall. Instead, they increased by 2.3 percent from the previous year. The sector needs this number to rise.

Services have been trying to improve the ways in which they recruit staff. They have carried out local recruitment campaigns and used social media. Their successes have varied. In some areas, recruitment rates have improved. The NFCC continues to develop its national recruitment campaign for on-call firefighters. The campaign highlights the opportunities open to people from all walks of life. The national website for on-call recruitment is a useful resource. It tells people where they may be needed, and provides

real-life stories giving insights into the role and what they may expect from it. But a more powerful campaign – perhaps similar to the call for volunteers to support the 2012 Olympic Games – may be needed. Incentives to employers, such as tax breaks, could encourage them to provide the flexibility on-call firefighters sometimes need.

Once services recruit on-call firefighters, it is essential that they create and maintain the conditions that make people want to stay. The recently introduced on-call apprenticeship should help retain on-call firefighters by providing people with the chance to develop their skills and gain or improve their qualifications.

The funding model needs review

In my last assessment, I dealt with the financial disparity between services. This remains a problem.

The way central government allocates funding to the sector needs to be reviewed. We found in Round 1 that some services didn't have enough money to employ the number of staff they needed.

During the pandemic, most services received Government grants to cover short-term additional costs. But services are worried about the longer-term financial effects. If the economic downturn continues, more businesses may close, which could reduce the amount raised through business rates. In turn, this would reduce the funding available to services because business rates are one of the services' three principal

sources of funding. To mitigate this, some services have held back grant money, putting it into their reserves in anticipation that it will be needed to cover possible reductions in income. It's too early to predict with any certainty whether income will fall, and whether this unspent grant money will cover any shortfall.

With nothing better than year-to-year financial settlements (common in the public sector), services have no medium- or long-term financial certainty. This makes financial and organisational planning (both local and national) very difficult. Services have multi-year plans, but no certainty on whether they will have enough funding to see the plans through. Uncertain public finances because of the pandemic mean that this problem will not be solved soon.

In my last assessment, I questioned whether the 45-service model is financially sustainable. Forty-five are too many. I remain of the view that there are financial and operational benefits to changing the model. In particular, there are benefits from services being coterminous (working within the same geographic boundaries) with police forces and Local Resilience Forums. A few services need to work with more than one police force and more than one Local Resilience Forum. This duplicates work, can cause confusion, and is not effective or efficient.

Round 2

We have inspected every service once. During this process, we improved our inspection techniques and expanded our knowledge.

Round 2 was to have started in March 2020.

The pandemic meant it had to be suspended; we returned seconded staff to their fire and rescue services for the duration of the emergency. While we will adapt our policies and practices to the circumstances of the pandemic, we restarted Round 2 in February 2021. We plan to inspect and report on every service by the end of 2022.

We intend to continue to inspect services' effectiveness and efficiency, and how well they treat their people. We always work on improving what we do, and so Round 2 inspections will include:

- a greater focus on race and diversity, and how services are overcoming undue inequalities;
- productivity of services;
- an assessment of how services are identifying and planning against their risks; and
- more case file reviews in relation to protection and buildings safety.

Conclusion

During the pandemic, the expertise and dedication of fire and rescue services have been invaluable sources of security. But the sector's response has been hindered by significant structural issues that need to be overcome.

Because of the pandemic, services have changed how they operate, reducing their contact with the public and business owners, and doing more work online. The pandemic has demonstrated how important it is that services understand the risks in their areas. For example, they need to understand who requires the most help, which premises are at greatest risk of fire, and the resources they need to respond effectively.

In my last assessment, I said local and national reform were needed to improve effectiveness and efficiency. I have not changed my mind. Improvements are being made, especially at a local level. But more change is needed at a faster pace. The Home Office's intentions for reform are encouraging. However, I continue to see working practices and cultures that have no place in a modern public service. Strong leadership is needed to implement reforms and make improvements, to overcome resistance and shape the future of the service. We owe it to the public to make sure that this happens.