

Dan Fearn
Temporary Chief Fire Officer
Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor Richard Rout
Cabinet Member for Environment and Public Protection
Suffolk County Council

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Fearn and Cllr Rout,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: SUFFOLK 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 2 and 13 November 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

5. In relation to your service, Suffolk's local resilience forum (LRF) declared a major incident on 20 March 2020.

6. In summary, we were impressed with how the service adapted and responded to the pandemic effectively. The efficient use of its staff was notable, utilising extra capacity and providing support and resource for remote and home working. It provided support to Suffolk County Council

(SCC) and the LRF, including advice, resources and effective command and control frameworks to co-ordinate its response.

7. The service maintained its statutory functions of prevention, protection and response while providing additional support to the community during the first phase of the pandemic, especially to its health partners. Staff delivered essential items to vulnerable people; wholetime and on-call staff drove ambulances; and other staff supported SCC and LRF activities. Resources were well managed, and the service's financial position was largely unaffected. Reserves didn't have to be used to cover extra costs.

8. The service communicated well with its staff throughout the pandemic, including issues relating to staff wellbeing. Extra wellbeing support was provided for its workforce who are at higher risk from COVID-19, including its black, Asian and minority ethnic staff. It also made sure all staff had the resources they needed to do their jobs effectively, including extra information and technology, and it put in place additional flexible working arrangements.

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. To be as efficient and effective as possible, Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service should focus on the following areas:

(a) It should determine how it will adopt for the longer-term, the new and innovative ways of working introduced during the pandemic, to secure lasting improvements.

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

Preparing for the pandemic

10. In line with good governance, the service had a pandemic flu plan 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 they didn't anticipate and mitigate all the risks presented by COVID-19. The service reviewed its plans to reflect the changing situation and established a critical incident team and a COVID-19 command structure that allowed it to respond to the pandemic and support SCC and the LRF.

Fulfilling statutory functions

12. The main functions of a fire and rescue service are firefighting, promoting fire safety through prevention and protection (making sure building owners comply with fire safety legislation), rescuing people in road traffic collisions, and responding to emergencies.

13. The service has continued to provide its core statutory functions throughout the pandemic in line with advice from the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC). This means the service has continued to respond to calls from the public and has attended emergencies. It has also continued to provide prevention and protection activities using a risk-based approach in line with NFCC

guidance, including face-to-face visits to the most vulnerable people who are at the greatest risk of fire in the community, and premises at highest risk of fire.

Response

14. The service told us that between 1 April and 30 June 2020 it attended more incidents than it did during the same period in 2019.

15. The overall availability of crewed fire engines was better during the pandemic than it was during the same period the previous year. Between 1 April and 30 June 2020, the service's average fire engine availability was 96.9 percent compared with 90.7 percent during the same period in 2019. The service told us this was as a result of an increased number of on-call firefighters being available due to being furloughed or working from home for their primary employment.

16. The service introduced a different crewing model during this period, reducing the size of a crew on a fire engine to a maximum of five. This was as a temporary measure to reduce the risk of infection.

17. The service told us that its average response time to fires remained broadly the same during the pandemic compared with the same period the previous year. This was for several reasons including better fire engine availability and less road traffic. This may not be reflected in [official data recently published by the Home Office](#), because services don't all collect and calculate their data the same way.

18. Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service (CFRS) provides Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service with its control function. CFRS took steps to ensure its joint control room was able to keep working effectively during the pandemic. For example, it expanded the number of staff who could support control in various ways, including training staff from elsewhere in the service, and streamlined its recruit control training course.

Prevention

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

20. The service conducted fewer home fire risk checks and safe and well checks than it normally would. It reviewed which individuals and groups it considered to be at an increased risk from fire due to the pandemic. It continued to support those at increased risk, and dedicated community safety officers made home fire risk and safe and well visits.

21. It continued to offer face-to-face safe and well visits on a risk-assessed basis and gave staff suitable personal protective equipment (PPE) to so.

22. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as using telephone and email to make the initial contact, completing COVID-19 risk assessments, and reducing the number of staff carrying out visits.

Protection

23. The NFCC issued guidance on how to continue protection activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes maintaining a risk-based approach, minimising exposure of staff and public to the risk of COVID-19, and demonstrating that the protection risk outweighs the COVID-19 risk. The service adopted this guidance.

24. The service didn't amend how it defines premises as high-risk during the pandemic. Risk is determined by many factors, and so services should keep this under review. The service recognises the risk to the public from fire can increase as businesses and other premises change their working environment in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

25. The service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it would normally undertake. It continued face-to-face fire safety activities on a risk-assessed basis, including audits on those premises that are at the greatest risk from fire, and provided staff with suitable PPE.

26. The service continued to respond to complaints and to issue alteration notices, enforcement notices and prohibition notices. It also continued responding to statutory building control consultations.

27. It introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as using telephone and email to make contact, reducing the number of staff carrying out visits, and providing COVID-specific fire safety advice for premises online.

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

Staff health and safety and wellbeing

29. 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 promoted wellbeing services and encouraged staff to discuss any worries they had.

30. Most staff survey respondents told us that they could access services to support their mental wellbeing if needed. Support put in place for staff included occupational health, counselling, peer support, COVID-specific guidance for staff and managers, and health questionnaires.

31. Staff most at risk from COVID-19 were identified effectively, including those from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background and those with underlying health problems. The service worked with staff to develop and implement processes to manage the risk. It increased one-to-one wellbeing checks and provided individual COVID-19 risk assessments, which take into account

high-risk factors and vulnerability to serious illness. Staff assessed as being at high or very high risk were provided with the necessary safeguards, such as modified duties and remote or home working.

32. 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.

33. The service assessed the risks of new work to make sure its staff had the skills and equipment needed to work safely and effectively.

34. The service provided its workforce with appropriate PPE on time. It participated in the national fire sector scheme to procure PPE, which allowed it to achieve value for money.

Staff absence

35. Absences have increased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of days lost due to sickness absence between 1 April and 30 June 2020 increased by 20.3 percent compared with the same period in 2019. Further staff were absent for other reasons, including the need to self-isolate.

36. The service updated the way it deals with staff absences to help it better manage wellbeing and health and safety. This included information about recording absences, self-isolation, testing, guidance for managers and bereavement. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff absent, self-isolating and working from home.

Staff engagement

37. 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 one-to-ones with managers, virtual team meetings, webinars, and communication groups for on-call and flexi duty staff. The service also created an app providing information about wellbeing and health and safety.

38. Most on-call firefighter survey respondents told us that they received more communication than usual during the pandemic. The service made use of the same tools it used to keep in touch with all staff (see above) when communicating with on-call staff during the pandemic.

39. The service intends to maintain changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19. It intends to maintain agile and flexible working by embracing technology where possible, and to support remote or home working as part of its usual processes.

Working with others, and making changes locally

40. 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.

41. The service carried out the following new activities: ambulance driving; training non-service personnel to drive ambulances; and delivering essential items to vulnerable people.

42. 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 support outside the tripartite agreement, the specifics would need to be agreed nationally before the work could begin.

43. The service consulted locally to implement the tripartite agreement with the FBU, the Fire Officers' Association and the Fire and Rescue Services Association.

44. Other unions were engaged, including UNISON, if their members were asked to do extra work, including that covered by the tripartite agreement.

45. Most 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.

46. There were extra requests for work by partner agencies. There was a clear willingness in the service to support local communities. However, the service did experience resistance from the local FBU representatives when they wanted to undertake a 'door knock' to check on the wellbeing of the most vulnerable.

47. Despite the tripartite agreement and the risk assessments that were in place for the service to check on the wellbeing of vulnerable people, the FBU did not agree to this activity. Despite these challenges, both wholetime and on-call staff volunteered to undertake the activity, and there was no delay in responding.

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

49. All activities to support other organisations during this period were monitored and reviewed.

Local resilience forum

50. 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.

51. The service was an active member of the LRF during the pandemic. The chief fire officer is the executive director for fire and public safety. He provided leadership and helped shape the LRF's and SCC's response to the pandemic. The service told us that the LRF's arrangements enabled the service to be fully engaged in the multi-agency response.

52. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the service was a member of the strategic co-ordinating group, chair of the tactical co-ordinating group, and an active member of the testing, wellbeing, PPE, healthcare, business continuity and finance groups. The service was able to allocate suitably qualified staff to participate in these groups without affecting its core duties.

Use of resources

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

54. The service has made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. Between 1 March and 30 June 2020 its main extra costs were £129,600 for staff supporting East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust, £85,000 for PPE and £17,700 for cleaning and decontamination supplies. The service incurred, and is reclaiming, £130,000 for driving ambulances. Where possible, staff have spent cautiously, and the service has exploited opportunities to make savings, using them to mitigate any financial risks. It fully understands the effect this will have on its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings.

55. SCC secured extra government funding to support its response. The service did not need access to this funding or its reserves to meet the extra costs that arose during this period.

56. Overtime was used to support staff who answered phones for the regional COVID-19 testing centre, beyond their contracted hours. This was managed appropriately.

Ways of working

57. The service changed how it operates during the pandemic. For example, it increased its use of agile, flexible working arrangements and virtual communication platforms including Microsoft Teams and Zoom. When required, SCC provided information and technology resources to support staff working from home. The service is reviewing the feedback it received from its online recruitment and virtual interview process.

58. 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.

59. The senior leaders have 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.

60. 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

61. 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.

62. 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.

63. As well as performing their statutory functions, wholetime and on-call firefighters undertook extra activities, including those under the tripartite agreement. Wholetime staff mainly provided support to the vulnerable, including welfare visits and delivery of food and essential items, while on-call staff mainly drove ambulances for the East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust. This approach was taken because the service felt this was the best way to ensure it had the resources it needed to meet its foreseeable risk and provide extra support to its community.

64. The service used its non-operational staff to support SCC and the LRF with their response to the pandemic. They helped to plan the mortuary facility and assisted with call handling at Suffolk's regional testing facility.

65. As part of its workforce planning, the service considered re-engaging retired members of staff to provide resilience across non-operational roles, but concluded this was not needed.

Governance of the service's response

66. 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.

67. Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service is part of Suffolk County Council. The Council's cabinet member for the environment and public protection has responsibility for the service as part of his remit, and is chair of the fire and rescue authority. The authority is made up of council members. The cabinet lead 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, and maintained a constructive relationship.

68. The service regularly updated the cabinet member 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.

69. The council put arrangements in place to give fire and rescue authority members relevant and regular information about how the service responded to the pandemic. It made use of technology and held meetings virtually.

70. During the pandemic, the authority continued to give the service proportionate oversight and scrutiny, including of its decision-making process. It did this by regularly communicating with the chief fire officer and receiving the service's written briefings.

Looking to the future

71. 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.

72. Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service has conducted a review of its response to the pandemic, including a staff survey. It is reviewing the lessons learned to inform its ways of working for the future. The service has improved its relationships with the police, ambulance and health partners, and is looking to build on its collaborations in the region. It is using virtual communication platforms to improve communication and staff welfare. The service has transformed its use of technology and is considering how virtual platforms and remote working can help it become more effective and efficient.

73. Good practice and lessons learned were shared through several routes, including regular information exchanges via the NFCC, and regular regional meetings. This included sharing its findings and learning from undertaking fire safety audits of schools during this period. The service found some schools' COVID-19 measures were potentially compromising their fire protection. These findings helped the NFCC to provide advice to schools and other premises.

Next steps

74. 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,



Zoë Billingham

Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary