

Steve Owen-Hughes
Chief Fire Officer
Surrey Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor Denise Turner-Stewart
Cabinet Member
Surrey Fire and Rescue Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Owen-Hughes and Cllr Turner-Stewart,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: SURREY 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 21 September and 2 October 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

5. In relation to your service, Surrey Local Resilience Forum (LRF) declared a major incident on 19 March 2020.

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

NFCC guidance to introduce remote audits but it did continue its reactive fire safety activities, as it prioritised its response activity and support to the LRF.

7. The service activated its business continuity and pandemic flu plans. These enabled it to make an effective initial response. It was able to call on increased numbers of on-call staff to support the operational and LRF response. It was also able to deal with two major incidents at the same time. It reduced elements of competency and fitness training. However, at the time of our inspection, it has plans to ensure sufficient training is provided.

8. Our last inspection identified a cause of concern. This related to the service not using its resources efficiently to manage risk, and not using its financial and physical resources effectively to keep people safe. The service has since developed and instigated a transformation plan. This aims to improve efficiency and effectiveness. But the plan has led to increased industrial relations tension, with industrial action taking place at the start of the pandemic.

9. The service regularly communicated COVID-19 information to its staff. But staff survey results indicated that the service could have communicated more, and that it could have responded more to staff feedback.

10. The service's financial position hasn't yet been significantly affected by COVID-19.

11. The service is looking to develop new ways of working as a result of its experiences from dealing with COVID-19.

12. 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, Surrey Fire and Rescue Service should focus on the following areas:

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

(b) It should consider what steps it needs to take to maintain its risk-based inspection programme. This should include what activity it can complete remotely and how to adapt its approach according to the restrictions in place at any time.

Preparing for the pandemic

13. 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. They were detailed enough to enable the service to make an effective initial response, but understandably didn't anticipate and mitigate all the risks presented by COVID-19. The service has reviewed its plans to reflect the changing situation and what it has learned during the pandemic.

14. The plans now include further detail on what elements of the service should maintain response capability if 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-19 secure', remote working and hygiene.

Fulfilling statutory functions

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

16. The service has continued to offer its response and prevention functions throughout the pandemic. But it couldn't undertake the full range of protection activities expected, as it chose to redeploy almost all protection staff to support its response function.

Response

17. 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.

18. The overall availability of fire engines was better than it was during the same period in 2019. Between 1 April and 30 June 2020, the service's average overall fire engine availability was 77.2 percent compared with 73.9 percent during the same period in 2019. We were told that this was a result of lower sickness levels among wholetime staff and because the service had relocated staff from elsewhere, such as protection and training, to response. This created additional resilience. There was also an increased number of on-call firefighters available to respond to emergencies because of being furloughed from their primary employment.

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

20. The service told us that its average response time to fires remained broadly the same during the pandemic compared with the same period in 2019. This was for several reasons, including less road traffic during this period and better fire engine availability. However, call handling times increased because the service introduced questions to identify any callers with potential COVID-19 symptoms. It did this in order to support the health and safety of any attending operational staff. 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 had adequate arrangements in place to make sure that its control room remained resilient during the pandemic. These included making sure that it maintained staffing levels, training non-operational staff to carry out control room tasks, introducing temperature-monitoring equipment into the building and limiting access to the premises to only those who worked there.

Prevention

22. The NFCC issued guidance explaining how services should take a risk-based approach to continuing prevention activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. The service introduced new measures before this guidance was introduced. Measures included targeting the most vulnerable people while risk-assessing and protecting its staff. While the service didn't initially adopt the NFCC's guidance – because the service adapted its activities before the guidance was available – the measures it took achieved similar outcomes.

23. The service conducted fewer safe and well visits 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, using data it shared with LRF partners on vulnerable people. As a result of this, the service conducted about the same number of visits to people it considers to be at high risk when compared with a similar period in 2019.

24. The service decided to continue offering face-to-face safe and well visits on a risk-assessed basis because it could give staff suitable personal protective equipment (PPE). It chose to introduce telephone calls to triage members of the public to help identify those at highest risk, in line with NFCC guidance. This is because it wanted to target only the people it considers to be at highest risk. It felt it should do this face-to-face.

Protection

25. The NFCC issued guidance on how to continue protection activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included maintaining a risk-based approach, introducing desktop audits and issuing enforcement notices electronically. The service didn't adopt this guidance.

26. The service didn't review how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic. As a result, it didn't conduct as many fire safety audits over the period we reviewed as we would have expected. It continued to respond to fire safety complaints but did not take any enforcement action during the period we reviewed. It did continue to respond to statutory building control consultations.

27. It decided to stop face-to-face fire safety audits and enforcement activity because it chose to move protection staff into roles supporting response and the LRF. It didn't introduce risk-based desktop appraisals instead of face-to-face audits, to minimise face-to-face contact between members of staff and the public.

28. This level of activity is less than what we would expect and is not in line with national expectations.

29. 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. It has done this through discussions with local authority building control, to make sure that the two organisations are aligned in terms of regulatory compliance.

30. A Nightingale hospital was in the service area at Headley Court. The service worked with the hospital's responsible person to put in place suitable and reasonable fire safety measures.

Staff health and safety and wellbeing

31. The service gave some consideration to the wellbeing needs of staff. But more could have been done to talk to staff about their needs so that the right support could be put in place. The service had a policy of line managers using their discretion to decide whether staff members needed wellbeing support. This policy resulted in infrequent provision to staff, because line managers weren't meeting their staff regularly.

32. 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, a dedicated occupational health telephone line for all staff, counselling, and external advice and guidance.

33. The service offered an individual risk assessment to all staff members. It also issued guidance to managers on how to complete the assessment, including for higher-risk members of staff (such as those from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background). The service hasn't yet discussed with its staff the potential longer-term effects of COVID-19 on its workforce.

34. 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. It assessed the risks of new work to make sure its staff had the skills and equipment needed to work safely and effectively, and gave its workforce appropriate PPE in a timely manner. But it wasn't able to make sure that it achieved value for money in the initial response to the pandemic. Later, it introduced control measures to try to achieve value for money. However, it didn't participate in the national fire sector scheme to procure PPE. This was because it had entered into contracts to maintain local supply before the national procurement was in place.

Staff absence

35. Absences have decreased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of shifts lost due to sickness absence decreased by 11.8 percent between 1 April and 30 June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019.

36. The service didn't update the absence policy, but it communicated additional information to staff so that it could better manage staff wellbeing, and health and safety. The additional information related to recording absences; self-isolation; testing arrangements; and information for managers, among other things. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

Staff engagement

37. Some staff survey respondents told us that the service provided regular and relevant communication to all staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included regular written correspondence and less frequent line manager discussions with staff about wellbeing, and health and safety.

Working with others, and making changes locally

38. 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.

39. The service carried out the following new activities: mortuary management, training to drive ambulances, assisting vulnerable people, managing and delivering PPE, and packing food for vulnerable people.

40. A national 'tripartite agreement' was put in place to include the new activities that firefighters could carry out during the pandemic. The agreement was between the NFCC, National Employers and the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), and specified what new roles firefighters could provide during the pandemic. Each service then consulted locally on the specific work it had been asked to support to agree how to address any health and safety requirements, including risk assessments. If public sector partners requested further support outside the tripartite agreement, the specifics would need to be agreed nationally before the work could begin.

41. The service consulted locally to implement the tripartite agreement with the FBU, Fire Officers' Association and the Fire and Rescue Service Association. All of the new work done by the service was started in agreement with partners before the tripartite agreement was agreed.

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

43. 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

44. 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 – in this case, Surrey LRF.

45. The service was an active member of the LRF during the pandemic. It told us that the LRF's arrangements enabled the service to be fully engaged in the multi-agency response.

46. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the service jointly chaired the strategic co-ordination group. It was a member of the following sub-groups: PPE, mortuary management, and vulnerable people. The service was able to allocate suitably qualified staff to participate in these groups. However, we believe this affected its ability to maintain its full range of protection activities.

Use of resources

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

48. The service has monitored the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. It fully understands the effect this will have on its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings, which it believes is negligible.

49. Surrey County Council received extra government funding to support its response to the pandemic. At the time of our inspection, the service's main additional costs were £20,700 spent on overtime payments for non-operational staff who were undertaking additional activities, and £94,400 buying back annual leave from operational staff. In order to ensure sufficient resource was available to respond to COVID 19 from an operational perspective, operational staff were given the option of selling seven days annual leave. However, the decision to offer this wasn't linked to a clear need for increased staff availability.

50. The service didn't access County Council reserves to meet the extra costs that arose during this period.

51. When used, overtime was managed appropriately. The service made sure that its staff who worked overtime had enough rest between shifts.

Ways of working

52. The service changed how it operates during the pandemic. For example, many staff were able to work from home. And the service continued to recruit to fill vacancies. It had the necessary IT to support remote working where appropriate. Where new IT equipment was needed, it made sure that procurement processes achieved good value for money.

53. The service could quickly implement changes to how it operates. This allowed its staff to work flexibly and efficiently during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, the service had plans to adapt its flexible working arrangements to make sure it had the right provisions in place to support a modern workforce. This approach will continue. The service is planning to review contracts for on-call firefighters, so that the service can use them differently in the future to cover roles besides response.

Staffing

54. 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. But because of its decision to reallocate all but two FTE staff away from its protection function, levels of activity weren't as expected.

55. Limited arrangements were put in place to effectively monitor the performance of staff across the service. This meant the service couldn't be sure its staff were making the best contribution that they reasonably could during this period. Nor could it identify where there was extra capacity that could have been redeployed to support other areas of the service or other organisations.

56. As well as performing their statutory functions, wholetime firefighters volunteered for extra activities, including those under the tripartite agreement. For most of the pandemic, the main role for wholetime firefighters was to provide the service's core responsibilities, while work under the tripartite agreement was done by other parts of the workforce. This approach was taken because the service started the extra activities before the tripartite agreement was in place. The service asked for volunteers before the tripartite agreement due to industrial action, which was ongoing at that time. Once the tripartite agreement was in place, it again requested volunteers.

57. The on-call workforce took on extra responsibilities covering most of the roles agreed as part of the tripartite agreement and the shifts of absent wholetime staff. Activity was also carried out by Surrey Fire and Rescue volunteers.

Governance of the service's response

58. 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.

59. Members of Surrey Fire and Rescue Authority were 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.

60. The fire and rescue authority maintained effective ways of working with the service during the pandemic. This made sure the service could fulfil its statutory duties as well as its extra work supporting the LRF and the tripartite arrangements. The fire and rescue authority put arrangements in place to give its members relevant and regular information about how the service responded to the pandemic. It made use of technology and held meetings virtually.

61. During the pandemic, the fire and rescue 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

62. 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.

63. Surrey Fire and Rescue Service has improved its collaboration with its LRF partners. The service is seen as a reliable and willing partner. The service plans to make permanent changes to on-call firefighters' terms and conditions so that they can continue to take on an expanded and more flexible role. Staff carrying out the new activities were from all parts of the service, on different contracts.

64. The service was looking at ways to improve agile working before the pandemic. It is considering how the lessons from COVID-19 can improve that approach. The service was able to recruit new staff through the pandemic. It is reviewing how this can support future recruitment. A flexible approach to training meant on-call and wholetime training was completed differently. This approach will be incorporated into future planning for training events.

65. Good practice and what worked was shared with other services through the NFCC and through ongoing engagement with neighbouring services.

Next steps

66. 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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M Parr', followed by a long, sweeping horizontal stroke.

Matt Parr CB

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