

Matt Parr CB

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

Justin Johnston
Chief Fire Officer
Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor Francesco De Molfetta
Chair
Lancashire Fire and Rescue Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Johnston and Cllr De Molfetta,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: LANCASHIRE 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 28 September and 8 October 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

5. In relation to your service, Lancashire Local Resilience Forum (LRF) declared a major incident on 12 March 2020.

6. In summary, the service adapted and responded to the pandemic effectively. It used on-call and wholtime firefighters to respond to emergencies, and it gave additional support to the community during the first phase of the pandemic. Prevention and protection staff made home fire

safety visits to the most vulnerable people and businesses. They used appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) for these visits. This meant the people of Lancashire were well supported throughout the pandemic. The service was able to effectively deal with some significant incidents, such as wildfires and flooding, during this period.

7. Its financial position was largely unaffected, and it didn't have to use its reserves. It also communicated well with its staff, including through virtual meeting platforms and podcasts. The service has provided its staff with good wellbeing support throughout the pandemic.

8. 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, Lancashire 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 whether the shared plans it uses, such as plans owned by the LRF, are comprehensive enough to meet the specific needs of the service and its community. If not, the service should make sure the plans change to reflect these needs.

Preparing for the pandemic

9. In line with good governance, the service had business continuity plans in place. The service relied on the county LRF pandemic flu plan as it didn't have its own. 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.

10. The service now has guidance documents on what elements of the service should maintain response capability if loss of staff is greater than normal. These are the degradation arrangements. They include prevention, protection, response and support functions, social distancing, making premises 'COVID secure', remote working, mutual aid, and supply of PPE.

Fulfilling statutory functions

11. 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.

12. The service has continued to provide its core statutory functions throughout the pandemic in line with advice from the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC). This means the service has continued to respond to calls from the public and attend emergencies. It has also continued to visit vulnerable people who are at the greatest risk of fire in the community. And it has continued to audit its highest risk premises.

Response

13. The service told us that between 1 April and 30 June 2020 it attended broadly the same number of incidents as it did during the same period in 2019.

14. The overall availability of fire engines was better during the pandemic 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 98 percent compared with 93 percent during the same period in 2019. We were told that this was as a result of lower sickness levels and an increased number of on-call firefighters being available to respond to emergencies because of being furloughed from their primary employment. The service didn't change its crewing models or shift patterns during this period.

15. 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 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.

16. The service is one of four to have a control function provided by North West Fire Control. It had good arrangements in place to make sure that its control room had enough staff during the pandemic.

17. These included effective resilience arrangements, such as having supervisors work from home, changing the control room layout to maintain social distance, and having good fallback provision. There are control rooms at West Midlands Fire Service and London Fire Brigade as part of the tri-services agreement.

Prevention

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

19. The service conducted fewer safe and well visits than it would normally undertake. The service reviewed which individuals and groups it considered to be at an increased risk from fire as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

20. The service decided to continue offering face-to-face safe and well visits on a risk-assessed basis and gave staff suitable PPE to do so. It also introduced the option of a home fire safety check by telephone instead of face-to-face home fire safety checks. The service carried out vulnerable persons checks on behalf of the district councils. As part of these checks, it was able to identify more high-risk people. It offered them welfare checks and advice by telephone. If necessary, staff made face-to-face visits to fit smoke alarms and offer other preventative measures. The service continued to offer interventions such as a Fire Setters programme, the Fire Cadets scheme, the Prince's Trust and Bright Sparx. It did this through virtual platforms.

Protection

21. The NFCC issued guidance on how to continue protection activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included maintaining a risk-based approach, completing desktop audits and issuing enforcement notices electronically. Activity included carrying out audits on those premises that are at the greatest risk from fire. The service adopted this guidance.
22. The service reviewed how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic. As a result, it used information from sub-groups of the LRF to identify hotels that were being used to rehome homeless people and to accommodate key workers. It worked with the owners of these buildings to ensure fire safety.
23. The service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it would normally undertake. It decided to continue face-to-face fire safety audits and enforcement work on a risk-assessed basis and gave staff suitable PPE to do so. It introduced risk-based desktop appraisals as well as face-to-face audits to minimise face-to-face contact between members of staff and the public.
24. The service continued to issue alteration notices, enforcement notices and prohibition notices and continued responding to statutory building control consultations. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact. These included making initial contact by telephone and email, and completing more desktop assessments. The service has adapted its IT system to support this new approach.
25. 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.
26. A recovery centre was located in the service area. The service worked with the responsible person to put in place suitable and reasonable fire safety measures.

Staff health and safety and wellbeing

27. Staff wellbeing was a clear priority for the service during the pandemic. It identified wellbeing problems and responded to any concerns and further needs. Senior leaders actively promoted wellbeing services and encouraged staff to discuss any worries they had.
28. Most staff survey respondents told us that they could access services to support their mental wellbeing if needed. Support put in place for staff included occupational health, counselling, peer support and access to an employee assistance programme. The service also used existing internal communication platforms to offer support and information.
29. 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. Managers identified staff who were most at risk and offered them personalised support. This support included letting

them work from home. The service also offered hotel accommodation to two firefighters, so they could protect vulnerable people who were living at their homes.

30. Wellbeing best practice was also shared with other services and partners within the LRF. The service is developing plans to support staff with the potential longer-term effects of COVID-19.

31. 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.

32. The service provided its workforce with appropriate PPE in a timely manner. It participated in the national fire sector scheme to procure PPE, which allowed it to achieve value for money.

Staff absence

33. Absences have remained stable compared with the same period in 2019. The number of days/shifts lost due to sickness absence between 1 April and 30 June 2020 decreased slightly by 2 percent compared with the same period in 2019.

34. The service updated the absence policy so that it could better manage staff wellbeing and health and safety, and make more effective decisions on how to allocate work. This included information about recording absences, self-isolation, testing, training for managers, and bereavement. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

Staff engagement

35. 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 virtual team meetings, written updates, and one-to-one meetings for staff to discuss wellbeing and health and safety with managers.

36. The service and managers made use of virtual platforms to support staff. It had a dedicated site on its intranet, and social media apps, for communicating with on-call staff during COVID-19.

37. The service intends to maintain changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19, including the use of its IT platforms as part of its communication with staff. It is also likely to retain some remote and flexible working.

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. The service carried out the following new activities: assisting vulnerable people, fitting of face masks, delivering PPE, antigen testing, and packing/repacking food for vulnerable people.

39. 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.

40. The service consulted locally to implement the tripartite agreement with the FBU and the Fire Officers' Association. Other unions were engaged, including UNISON, if their members were asked to do extra work, including under the tripartite agreement.

41. Most of the new work done by the service under the tripartite agreement was agreed in time for it to start promptly and in line with the request from the partner agency. There were extra requests for work by partner agencies that fell outside the tripartite agreement, including supporting local authorities with business continuity reviews; co-ordinating support to trial track and trace; supporting Public Health England with its study into antibody testing, which included the blood testing of 300 participants. The service also worked in collaboration with police in the early stages of the pandemic to introduce staff testing for COVID-19. This approach to staff testing was shared with the NFCC. This work was agreed and undertaken on time and in line with the request from the partner agency.

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 monitored all activities to support other organisations during this period. It will review them. The service has already identified some which it may continue. These include the sharing of vulnerable persons' data and joint prevention campaigns (such as staying safe during the winter and looking after your neighbours).

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, Lancashire LRF.

45. The service was an active member of Lancashire LRF during the pandemic. The service told us that the LRF's arrangements enabled the service to be fully engaged in the multi-agency response. It gave administration and chairperson support to LRF sub-groups. It also co-ordinated and distributed PPE for all LRF partners. The service was able to allocate suitably qualified staff to participate in these groups without affecting its core duties.

Use of resources

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

47. The service has made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. At the time of our inspection its main extra costs were £24,000 spent on overtime for staff, £178,000 spent on IT, £578,000 spent on PPE, and £132,000 spent on cleaning and decontamination of buildings. It fully understands the effect this will have on its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings. Where possible, it has exploited opportunities to make savings during this period and used them to mitigate the financial risks it has identified.

48. The service received £1.4m of extra government funding to support its response. At the time of our inspection it had spent £900,000 of this money, and has retained the rest to meet future costs associated with the pandemic. It has shown how it used this income efficiently, and that it mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period.

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

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

Ways of working

51. The service changed how it operates during the pandemic. For example, it conducted most of its meetings virtually, both with staff and its fire and rescue authority. It developed new virtual training packages. And it reused filters in PPE masks. It had the necessary IT to support remote working where appropriate. Where new IT was needed, it made sure that procurement processes achieved good value for money.

52. The service was able to 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.

53. The service has 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.

54. 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

55. 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.

56. 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.

57. As well as performing their statutory functions, wholetime firefighters volunteered for extra activities, including those under the tripartite agreement.

58. The on-call workforce took on extra responsibilities. These included community prevention activities in their local area. The service also used the on-call workforce to give emergency response cover at wholetime fire stations.

59. The service started contracts earlier than planned for on-call staff who were successful in a recent recruitment process. It did this to give cover during the pandemic.

Governance of the service's response

60. 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.

61. Members of Lancashire 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. The service regularly updated the fire and rescue authority 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 agreement.

62. During the pandemic, the fire and rescue authority maintained effective ways of working with the service. This made sure the service could fulfil its statutory duties as well as its extra work supporting the LRF and the tripartite arrangements. 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

63. 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.

64. The service has improved its collaboration with other LRF partners. An example of the benefits includes the sharing of information between partner organisations about vulnerable people in the community. Better collaboration has also led to improved referrals being made to the service for safe and well visits. The service's improved communication and ways of working have had a positive effect on staff wellbeing. The service has transformed its use of technology to support remote working and to create virtual platforms. It plans to continue with these new ways of working to become more efficient and effective. The service has regularly reviewed how it has responded to the pandemic. It will use any lessons learned in future planning.

65. Good practice and what worked was shared with other services through the NFCC and other regional groups. This includes frequent testing of Lancashire FRS's own staff for COVID-19, and the reusing of filters in face masks.

Next steps

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

Yours sincerely,

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

Matt Parr CB

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