

Jo Turton
Chief Fire Officer
Essex County Fire and Rescue Service

Roger Hirst
Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner

22 January 2021

Dear Ms Turton and Commissioner Hirst,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: ESSEX COUNTY 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 13 October 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

5. In relation to your service, the Chair of the Essex Resilience Forum (Chief Constable Harrington, Essex Police) declared a major incident on 19 March 2020.

6. In summary, the service adapted and responded to the pandemic effectively and efficiently. The service successfully used a risk-based approach to its prevention and protection work.

7. It provided additional support to the community during the first phase of the pandemic. It used its wholetime firefighters to respond to emergencies, and its on-call workforce increased its availability for response. Staff from across the service volunteered for additional duties including driving ambulances, delivering personal protective equipment (PPE) and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities, and packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people. This meant the people of Essex were well supported through the pandemic.

8. Resources were well managed, and the service's financial position was unaffected, especially as it didn't have to use reserves. The service responded quickly to staff absences and made sure its control room was resilient. It communicated well with its staff throughout the pandemic, including about staff wellbeing. It also made sure all staff had the resources they needed to do their jobs effectively, providing extra IT and putting in place new flexible working arrangements. The service is considering how best to continue with its risk-based approach to its prevention and protection work as well as its cross-team way of working.

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, Essex County Fire and Rescue Service should focus on the following areas:

(a) It should work with all staff to determine how it can identify and address any longer-term impact COVID-19 may have on their wellbeing.

(b) It should make sure wholetime firefighters are fully productive, while minimising the risk of them contracting or spreading the virus.

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 enough to enable the service to anticipate and mitigate the risks presented by COVID-19, including maintaining an appropriate level of fire cover and protecting its staff.

12. The service has reviewed its plans to reflect the changing situation and what it has learned during the pandemic.

13. 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 secure', remote working, mutual aid, supply of PPE, different crewing methods, and additional shifts to make sure enough firefighters are available.

Fulfilling statutory functions

14. 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.

15. 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 attended emergencies. It has also continued to carry out home fire safety checks and safe and well visits by assessing the risks in advance and prioritising the most vulnerable. It moved its education activities online. The service continued to do its protection work, reviewing fire safety using a risk-based desktop approach. It also continued its enforcement activity.

Response

16. 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.

17. 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 91.2 percent compared with 81.8 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 due to being furloughed from their primary employment.

18. The service introduced different and flexible crewing models as a temporary measure during this period. These included reducing crew numbers to four and sending additional staff home who weren't needed to crew engines so that there was less risk of them being infected. But while at home, they would respond if required to return to station during the shift.

19. The service told us that its average response time to fires improved during the pandemic compared with the same period in 2019. This was for several reasons, including lower sickness levels and better fire engine availability during this period. This may not be reflected in [official statistics recently published by the Home Office](#), because services don't all collect and calculate their data the same way.

20. The service had good arrangements in place to make sure that its control room had enough staff during the pandemic.

21. This included effective resilience arrangements, such as keeping the control room separate and COVID-secure, retraining staff who had worked there before, and arranging a second control room 'bubble'.

Prevention

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

23. Over the period we reviewed, the service conducted fewer home fire safety checks/safe and well visits than it would normally undertake. In the early stages of the pandemic, the service reduced the range of people it offered home fire safety checks/safe and well visits to and focused solely on those most at risk from fire. The service reviewed those individuals and groups it considered to be at an increased risk from fire as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, it added people on the shielding list as being at increased risk from fire.

24. The service continued to offer face-to-face home fire safety checks/safe and well visits on a risk-assessed basis and provided staff with suitable PPE to do so.

25. As an alternative to face-to-face home fire safety checks/safe and well visits, the service offered the option of a home fire safety check/safe and well visit by telephone. It also introduced other options including online advice, dropping off a smoke alarm with fitting instructions, and the offer of a follow-up visit at a later date.

Protection

26. The NFCC has issued guidance on how to continue protection activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes maintaining a risk-based approach, completing desktop audits and issuing enforcement notices electronically. The service adopted this guidance.

27. The service reviewed how it defines premises as high-risk during the pandemic. As a result, it altered its risk-based inspection programme to target high-rise residential buildings that were at increased risk from fire. It is continuing with physical audits where premises are COVID safe, with appropriate risk assessments for premises and staff.

28. The service conducted more fire safety audits than it would normally undertake. This was because it introduced risk-based desktop appraisals instead of face-to-face audits to minimise face-to-face contact between members of staff and the public. Face-to-face audits were only undertaken on a risk-assessed basis and staff were provided with suitable PPE to do them.

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

30. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact. Staff worked from home during April, May and June, and were able to use video conferencing to communicate. Letters to businesses were adapted, and all businesses were asked to send records electronically. The service continued with targeted social media campaigning about safety in the home and making sure that business premises were COVID safe. As businesses started to open up, the

service's messaging focused on how having COVID measures, such as one-way systems around buildings, might affect fire safety.

31. 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

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

33. 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, an online and paper wellbeing booklet, an online wellbeing hub, a dedicated helpline, a welfare point of contact for firefighters acting as ambulance drivers, 'seven-minute briefings' for issues such as domestic abuse, Wellbeing Wednesdays focusing on local and national wellbeing topics, and access to external resources such as trauma and bereavement services.

34. 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 followed national guidance to identify risk groups and then tailor support to the individual. Support included a single point of contact and regular contact with the individual's manager.

35. Wellbeing best practice was also shared with other services. The service has discussed with its staff how it should plan for the potential longer-term effects of COVID-19 on its workforce.

36. 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. During lockdown, some fitness tests could not be completed. Following a review and full risk assessment in August 2020, the service put in place a recovery plan that began on 10 September 2020.

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

38. 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

39. Absences have decreased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of shifts lost due to sickness absence between 1 April and 30 June 2020 decreased by 45.0 percent compared with the same period in 2019.

40. 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, return to work interviews and bereavement. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

Staff engagement

41. 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 correspondence, and one-to-ones with a manager or equivalent about wellbeing and health and safety.

42. The service intends to maintain changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19, including: amending its home working policy to focus on mobile working; emphasising productivity rather than 'presenteeism' (going to work when unwell); new and varied ways of communicating; and recognition of good performance with, for example, monthly awards and 'Thank you Thursday' where people are recognised for good work.

Working with others, and making changes locally

43. 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.

44. The service carried out the following new activities: driving ambulances, assisting vulnerable people, delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities, ambulance transport, ambulance driving training/instruction, moving hospital beds and furniture in COVID wards, and packing/repacking food for vulnerable people.

45. 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 agree to engage in during the pandemic. Each service then undertook local consultations on the specific work it had been asked to support, to agree how any health and safety requirements, including risk assessments, would be addressed. If public sector partners requested further support from services with additional roles that were outside the tripartite agreement, the specifics would need to be agreed nationally before the work could begin.

46. The service consulted locally to implement the tripartite agreement with the FBU and the Fire and Rescue Service Association.

47. Other unions were engaged if their members were asked to do extra work, including under the tripartite agreement.

48. All 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.

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

50. On-call staff were seconded to the East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust as ambulance drivers; the cost of their salaries was met by the government grant funding. An extra responsibilities allowance was paid to a few staff who took on other roles outside their normal duties.

51. All activities to support other organisations were monitored and reviewed. The service has identified which are to continue, for example ambulance driver training.

Local resilience forum

52. 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 local resilience forum (LRF). Essex County Fire and Rescue Service is a member of the Essex Resilience Forum (ERF).

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

54. As part of the ERF's response to COVID-19, the service co-chaired the ERF itself, along with the strategic co-ordination group and the multi-agency information cell. It was a member of the volunteering, compliance and enforcement, EU transition, ERF resilience, recovery co-ordination, and strategic co-ordination groups. The service was able to allocate suitably qualified staff to participate in these groups without affecting its core duties.

Use of resources

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

56. The service has made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. Up to 30 September 2020, its main extra costs were ambulance driver secondments, extra responsibilities allowances, PPE, cleaning and decontamination supplies, ICT infrastructure and licencing, thermometers, and signage. Where possible, it has exploited opportunities to make savings during this period and used them to mitigate the financial risks it has identified.

57. The service received £1.7m of extra government funding to support its response. By 30 September 2020, it had spent £1.2m of the funding on ambulance driver secondments, extra responsibilities allowances, PPE, cleaning and decontamination supplies, ICT infrastructure and licencing, thermometers, and signage. It has shown how it used this income efficiently, and that it mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period. The service plans to use grant

funding not spent by the end of March 2021 to pay for any COVID-19 costs incurred in the next financial year of 2021/22.

58. The service didn't use any of its reserves to meet the extra costs that arose during this period. It didn't incur any overtime costs in its response to the pandemic.

Ways of working

59. The service changed the way in which it operates during the pandemic. For example, it made better use of technology. It swiftly implemented IT solutions to support new ways of working: support services worked from home, protection staff did desktop audits to maintain the risk-based inspection programme, and education activities were carried out using online training platforms. It also carried out ambulance driver training. 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.

60. 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.

61. 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

62. 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.

63. 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.

64. 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 felt this was the best way to make sure it had the resources it needed to meet its foreseeable risk.

65. We expect services to keep their processes under review to make sure they use their wholetime workforces as productively as possible.

66. The on-call workforce took on extra responsibilities covering some of the roles agreed as part of the tripartite agreement.

67. As part of its workforce planning, the service contacted recent leavers to see if they were willing to return if required to provide resilience across a range of roles and to support its work under the agreed changes. The service had a good response from people willing to return and help but did not need to call on them.

Governance of the service's response

68. Each fire and rescue service is overseen by a fire and rescue authority. There are several different governance arrangements in place across England with the size of the authority varying between services. Each authority ultimately has the same function, namely, to set the service's priorities and budget and make sure that the budget is spent wisely.

69. The Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (PFCC) for Essex 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.

70. During the pandemic, the PFCC continued to give the service proportionate oversight and scrutiny, including of its decision-making process. To make sure that the service was able to maintain its statutory functions during COVID-19, more frequent meetings were set up immediately to allow extra support and focus from the PFCC. The PFCC maintained good awareness of the tripartite arrangements and is providing oversight and scrutiny to the service's recovery plans. All the usual governance arrangements also stayed in place, with monthly financial reporting. Scheduled meetings carried on, with informal calls to brief the PFCC and sound out his opinions.

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. Essex County Fire and Rescue Service plans to make lasting changes in its prevention and protection functions. Educational activities will continue to be done both online and face to face. Home fire safety/safe and well visits will continue to be prioritised based on who is most at risk from fire, with operational crews part of targeted visits to people at low risk. Desktop audits will continue.

73. The service plans to improve its protection by continuing to engage with businesses online. It will continue its cross-team groups in both prevention and protection. These resulted in more effective decision making, with shared understanding and knowledge across the large and varied workstreams. The groups pooled resources and worked in a co-ordinated way, using resources and expertise from other teams. The service plans to continue ambulance driver training. It also transformed its use of technology and is considering how virtual platforms and remote working can help it become more effective and efficient.

74. Good practice and what worked was shared with other services through the NFCC, other fire and rescue services, LRF debriefs and other organisations in the region. This information included investing in fogging units for intense sanitation of workplaces if a member of staff became symptomatic in the workplace, desktop auditing, ambulance driver training, and the ambulance driver secondment agreement.

Next steps

75. 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 that reads "Zoë Billingham". The signature is written in a cursive style and is centered within a light grey rectangular box.

Zoë Billingham

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