

**Matt Parr CB**

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

Chris Blacksell  
Chief Fire Officer  
Humberside Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor John Briggs  
Chair  
Humberside Fire and Rescue Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Blacksell and Cllr Briggs,

**COVID-19 INSPECTION: HUMBERSIDE 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 12 and 23 October 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

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

6. In summary, the service adapted and responded to the pandemic effectively and continued to maintain its statutory functions throughout. It provided extra support to the community during the first phase of the pandemic. It predominantly used its wholetime firefighters to respond to

emergencies. It used the increased availability of its on-call and prevention and protection staff to deliver medicines and food to vulnerable members of the community. On-call staff were trained to drive ambulances and to support mortuaries, but ultimately, this support wasn't needed. The service managed resources well and its financial position was largely unaffected, especially as it didn't have to use reserves to cover extra costs.

7. The service was able to respond quickly to staff absences, and it implemented changes to build resilience in its control room. It communicated well with its staff throughout the pandemic, including on issues relating to staff wellbeing. It also made sure all staff had the resources they needed to do their jobs effectively, including providing extra IT and putting in place new flexible working arrangements.

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. To be as efficient and effective as possible, Humberside Fire and Rescue Service should focus on determining how it will adopt for the longer-term the new and innovative ways of working introduced during the pandemic, to secure lasting improvements.

### **Preparing for the pandemic**

9. 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 they didn't anticipate and mitigate all the risks presented by COVID-19.

10. The service has reviewed its plans to reflect the changing situation and what it has learned during the pandemic. They now include further detail on social distancing, making premises COVID secure and agile working.

### **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 attended emergencies. It has also continued to focus prevention activity towards those members of the public who are deemed to be at higher risk. The service followed NFCC protection guidance. It introduced desktop audits, and talked to and worked with businesses over the telephone.

## *Response*

13. 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.
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 98.3 percent compared with 94.3 percent during the same period in 2019. We were told that this was as a result of lower sickness absence and an increased number of on-call firefighters being available to respond to emergencies because of being furloughed from their primary employment.
15. The service introduced different crewing models as a temporary measure during this period. These included 'send home' arrangements, where the service reduced the number of firefighters who rode on engines to four and sent unused staff home on standby. In fire stations that operate more than one fire engine, the service used alternative work locations so that only one engine operated out of a particular location. This contributed to the service maintaining high availability of its fire engines.
16. 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.
17. The service had good arrangements in place so that its control room had enough staff during the pandemic. This included effective resilience arrangements. The service isolated the control room three weeks prior to the national lockdown. Its measures included restricted entry, one-way systems, and balancing resources with a 'send home' policy. The service had arrangements with three other fire control rooms within the East Coast & Hertfordshire Control Room Consortium for fallback arrangements.

## *Prevention*

18. 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.
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. It adapted its approach and prioritised referrals only.
20. The service decided to continue offering face-to-face safe and well visits to those people deemed at high risk of fire. It introduced extra control measures to keep both staff and the community safe. The service also introduced the option of a safe and well visit by telephone.

## *Protection*

21. 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. Activity included carrying out audits on those premises that are at the greatest risk from fire. The service adopted this guidance.
22. The service didn't change how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic.
23. The service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it would normally undertake.
24. The service issued one alteration notice, but didn't issue any enforcement notices or prohibition notices. It continued responding to statutory building control consultations.
25. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as risk-based desktop appraisals, using the telephone to talk to and work with businesses, and sharing documents electronically with other organisations.
26. The service worked with the responsible person to put in place suitable and reasonable fire safety measures at two temporary mortuaries which were built during the pandemic.

## **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 dedicated wellbeing contacts, as well as occupational health, counselling, and updated information about fitness and wellbeing on the service intranet.
29. Staff most at risk from COVID-19 were identified effectively, including those with underlying health problems. The service worked with staff to develop and implement processes to manage the risk. All staff completed an impact assessment with their line manager. Occupational health gave support to staff who needed it.
30. 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.
31. The service made sure that firefighters were competent to do their work during the pandemic. In March 2020, the service stopped routine fitness testing. This has since been resumed and all staff requiring it have now been tested. The service 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 suitable personal protective equipment (PPE) on time. It participated in the national fire sector scheme to procure PPE and sourced several local providers. This gave the service resilience and flexibility.

#### *Staff absence*

33. 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 24.5 percent compared with the same period in 2019.

34. The service included extra information to supplement the absence policy, which enabled it to better manage staff wellbeing and health and safety, and make more effective decisions on how to allocate work. This included information about shielding, self-isolation, returning to work, and testing requirements. 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 updates in the staff newsletter, online messaging, virtual team meetings, one-to-ones with managers, and updated information on the intranet portal.

36. The service intends to maintain changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19, including retaining agile and flexible working in relation to staff wellbeing.

#### **Working with others, and making changes locally**

37. 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.

38. The service carried out the following new activities: assisting vulnerable people; packing and repacking food for vulnerable people; delivering PPE; and providing training to care homes on face mask fitting. Staff were trained to drive ambulances. They were also trained in the movement of bodies. But, ultimately, these forms of support weren't needed.

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 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. The service consulted locally with the FBU to implement the tripartite agreement.

40. The service engaged with the FBU and other representative bodies including Fire and Rescue Services Association, the Fire Officers' Association and UNISON on matters related to staff wellbeing and health and safety.

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

42. All activities to support other organisations during this period were monitored.

43. The service hasn't yet fully reviewed and evaluated its activities to support other organisations during this period.

#### *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 Humber LRF. The service was an active member of the LRF during the pandemic. It told us that the LRF's arrangements enabled the service to fully engage in the multi-agency response.

45. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the service chaired the tactical co-ordination group. It was a member of the regional response co-ordination group, and multiple cells including communications; COVID-19 testing; shielding hubs; excess deaths; PPE; resource; recovery; economic resilience; logistics; and four local authority hubs. The service was able to allocate suitably qualified staff to participate in these groups without affecting its core duties.

#### **Use of resources**

46. At the time of our inspection, the service's financial position hadn'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. By 30 June 2020, its main extra costs were £151,000 on salaries for on-call staff who were doing extra duties; £121,000 on PPE; and almost £200,000 on purchasing IT equipment. 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 any financial risks it has identified. This includes the BP fuel initiative.

48. The service received £900,000 of extra government funding to support its response, of which it has spent £710,000. 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.

#### *Ways of working*

50. The service changed the way in which it operates during the pandemic. For example, it introduced agile and flexible working. It delivered training remotely through its use of IT. 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.

51. 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.

52. The service increased the salary temporarily for on-call firefighters in recognition of the increased availability. Some on-call firefighters received a temporary wholetime contract while they did extra duties to support the tripartite agreement.

53. The service has had positive feedback from staff on how they were engaged with during the pandemic. The service introduced extra mental health support and has reviewed its agile working policy.

#### *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.

55. 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.

56. During the pandemic, the main role of wholetime firefighters was to provide the service's core response responsibility, while work under the tripartite agreement was done predominantly by other parts of the workforce. The service took this approach to isolate wholetime firefighters, to minimise the risk of them being infected with COVID-19. In this way, it was making sure that it had appropriate numbers of staff to respond to emergencies. A small group of on-call staff took on extra responsibilities to provide additional activities, including those under the tripartite agreement. We expect services to keep their processes under review to make sure they use their wholetime workforces as productively as possible.

## **Governance of the service's response**

57. Each fire and rescue service is overseen by a fire and rescue authority (FRA). 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.

58. Members of Humberside FRA were actively involved in discussions with the chief fire officer and the service on the service's ability to discharge its statutory functions during the pandemic. The FRA maintained effective ways of working with the service, making sure the service could fulfil its statutory duties as well as its extra work supporting the LRF and the tripartite arrangements.

59. The FRA continued to give the service proportionate oversight and scrutiny, including its decision-making process. It did this by regularly communicating with the chief fire officer and receiving updates from the section 151 officer, both during FRA meetings and separately through the governance and scrutiny committee briefings.

## **Looking to the future**

60. During the pandemic, services were able to adapt quickly to new ways of working. This meant they were able to 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.

61. During the pandemic, the service had access to data identifying those who are frail. It wants to work with health partners to continue to receive this information once the pandemic ends. This is because the information will enhance the risk data it holds. It will also help the service to target its prevention activities to vulnerable people.

62. The service invested in a new stock control management system to improve how it records and manages stock, particularly PPE.

63. The service has recognised the improved flexibility for staff when they work remotely. It has reviewed the agile working policy and invested in technology. It has also changed its training to increase virtual training and assessment packages for operational staff.

64. Good practice and what worked was shared with other regional fire and rescue services and the NFCC. This includes information about business continuity plans, PPE, and health and safety and wellbeing.

## **Next steps**

65. 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 'MP' followed by a stylized flourish and a long horizontal stroke.

**Matt Parr CB**

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