



Promoting improvements
in policing and fire & rescue
services to make everyone safer

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Phil Garrigan
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Councillor Les Byrom
Chair
Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Garrigan and Councillor Byrom,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: MERSEYSIDE 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 9 October 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

5. In relation to your service, the Merseyside Local Resilience Forum (LRF) declared a major incident on 23 March 2020.

6. In summary, the service adapted and responded to the pandemic effectively. It continued to maintain its statutory functions and responded effectively to a major incident at an industrial estate during the pandemic.

7. In January 2020, the service gained an insight into the risk and control measures required for COVID-19 through its early involvement with repatriated patients from China at Arrowe Park Hospital. It used this insight effectively to make sure it was appropriately prepared. Staff also provided additional support to the community during the first phase of the pandemic.
8. Resources were well managed, and the service's financial position was largely unaffected, especially as reserves didn't have to be used to cover extra costs. The service could respond quickly to staff absences and acted to build resilience in its control room. It implemented more flexible ways of working, including providing additional IT for staff to work remotely.
9. The service communicated well with its staff throughout the pandemic, including on issues relating to staff wellbeing. A notable achievement is the extra contact and support it gave to its black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) workforce, who may be at higher risk of COVID-19.
10. The service – and the chief fire officer – had a leading role in co-ordinating the fire sector's response to the pandemic.
11. 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, Merseyside 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 update its plans, including business continuity and pandemic flu plans, using the lessons it has learned from the pandemic to date.
 - (c) It should determine how it can improve its IT and systems so that staff can effectively work remotely.

Preparing for the pandemic

12. 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.
13. 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, maintaining 'COVID-secure' workplaces, agile working, appropriate ways to clean equipment, and changes to testing and maintenance of breathing apparatus.

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 attend emergencies. The service followed the NFCC's prevention and protection guidance, risk-assessing face-to-face activities and introducing control measures to keep staff and the community safe.

Response

16. 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.

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 100 percent compared with 91.3 percent during the same period in 2019. We were told that this was as a result of lower sickness levels among staff.

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

19. 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.

20. The service had good arrangements in place to make sure that its control room had enough staff during the pandemic. These included implementing effective resilience arrangements such as putting in place enhanced social distancing, and arranging for control room staff to avoid having unnecessary contact with others.

Prevention

21. 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.

22. The service conducted fewer home fire safety checks 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. It decided to continue offering face-to-face home fire safety checks to people where the risk of fire was high, and gave staff suitable personal protective equipment (PPE).

23. The service introduced a triage facility through a call centre, where staff offered guidance on how members of the public could keep themselves safe from fire in the home. Frontline staff from care organisations helped the service by identifying vulnerable people who needed extra fire safety advice.

Protection

24. The NFCC 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.

25. The service didn't review how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic. It did increase the advice and guidance it gave to the hospitality sector. It did this to make sure that fire safety measures weren't adversely affected by changes made to premises as they reopened after lockdown.

26. The service conducted more fire safety audits than it would normally undertake. This was because the service adapted its approach by completing desktop audits.

27. The service continued to issue enforcement notices, although it didn't issue any alteration or prohibition notices. It also continued responding to statutory building control consultations. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as completing more desktop assessments, using video conferencing and receiving videos electronically.

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 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.

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 and access to external resources (such as an employee assistance programme).

31. Staff most at risk of COVID-19 were identified effectively, including those from a BAME background and those with underlying health problems. The service worked with staff to develop and implement processes to manage the risk. Staff who needed to shield notified the service. Occupational health contacted them monthly, and they had regular contact from their line manager. In June 2020, BAME staff received a joint letter from the assistant chief fire officer and the chair of the BAME staff network group to offer additional support. This included access to senior leaders, with whom they could raise any concerns.

32. The service made sure that firefighters were competent to do their work during the pandemic. However, this didn't include keeping up to date with firefighter fitness requirements, although staff had access to fitness facilities during the pandemic.

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. The service provided its workforce with suitable PPE on time. It participated in the national fire sector scheme to procure PPE and also sourced PPE from other suppliers where necessary.

Staff absence

34. Absences have decreased 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 by 5.6 percent compared with the same period in 2019.

35. The service created guidance documents to supplement its absence policy. This enabled it to better manage staff wellbeing and health and safety, and to make more effective decisions on how to allocate work. This included information about reporting COVID-19 related absences, self-isolation and testing. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

Staff engagement

36. 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, information on the intranet, and live chat sessions with staff about wellbeing and health and safety.

37. The service intends to maintain changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19, including continuing to use online platforms to communicate virtually with staff as part of its usual processes.

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: moving bodies; helping vulnerable people; face fitting for masks; delivering PPE; and packing and delivering food and prescriptions 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, Fire & Rescue Service 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.

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

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

43. All activities to support other organisations during this period were monitored. The service 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. Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service was an active member of the LRF during the pandemic. The service 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, a series of sub-groups were formed. The service chaired one covering 'death management' cell and co-chaired the emergency services one. It was also a member of the following sub-groups: communications; logistics and resources; PPE; recovery; social care; swabbing; test, track and trace; volunteering and shielding vulnerable persons; and enforcement compliance. 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. It has made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. By July 2020, its main extra costs were £256,000 on PPE, cleaning and decontamination; £83,000 on IT; and £30,000 on staffing costs. It fully understands the effect this will have on its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings.

47. The service received £1.4m of extra government funding to support its response. By July 2020, it had spent approximately £655,000 of this money on PPE, cleaning and decontamination; IT infrastructure and licensing; overtime and staffing costs; and improving premises to enable

social distancing. It has shown how it used this income efficiently, and that it mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period.

48. The service didn't use any of its reserves to meet the extra costs that arose during this period. Overtime was used so the service could prepare for and carry out extra activities to meet the needs of the community.

Ways of working

49. The service changed the way in which it operates during the pandemic. For example, it very quickly introduced agile working. The service identified risk-critical roles and prioritised the purchase of new IT equipment. However, not everyone had the necessary IT to support remote working. The service has now taken steps to address this.

50. The service implemented 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. It had positive feedback from staff on how they were engaged with during the pandemic. It also 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

51. The service had enough resources available to respond to the level of demand during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to re-allocate resources where necessary to support the work of its partner agencies. Extra capacity was identified and reassigned to support other areas of the service and other organisations.

52. As well as performing their statutory functions, wholtime firefighters and other staff volunteered for extra activities, including those under the tripartite agreement.

Governance of the service's response

53. 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.

54. Members of Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority were actively engaged in discussions with the service and its senior management on the service's ability to discharge its statutory functions during the pandemic.

55. The service regularly updated fire and rescue authority members 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.

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

57. During the pandemic, the fire and rescue authority maintained some oversight of the service, including its decision-making process, and was kept informed about decisions it made. The authority reduced its oversight because it recognised the critical nature of this incident, and the need for the chief fire officer to be able to quickly adapt the service's response to effectively support its staff and communities. The authority maintained regular communication with the chief fire officer and received the service's written briefings.

Looking to the future

58. 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.

59. Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service could use its resources effectively to support partner agencies, including health partners. It is looking at ways to improve this collaboration, including through increased use of technology to develop ways of working. The service has improved its communication with staff, and has adapted to become more flexible in terms of its working practices. It has transformed its use of technology, and is considering how virtual platforms can help it become more effective and efficient in the future.

60. Good practice and what worked was shared with other services through the NFCC. This includes risk assessments and service instructions for activities under the tripartite agreement.

Next steps

61. 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,



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