

For Publication

Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Authority  
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**REPORT AUTHOR:** DEPUTY CHIEF FIRE OFFICER

**SUBJECT:** HMICFRS COVID19 INSPECTION REPORT

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Background Papers: None

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Implications (tick ✓):

LEGAL		✓	FINANCIAL	
HUMAN RESOURCES			EQUALITY IMPACT	
ENVIRONMENTAL			POLICY	
CORPORATE RISK	Known	✓	OTHER (please specify)	
	New			

*Any implications affecting this report are noted at the end of the report.*

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**PURPOSE:**

The purpose of this report is to inform the Fire and Rescue Authority (FRA) of the outcomes of the Covid19 thematic inspection conducted by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) during 2020.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. That Members consider the findings of HMICFRS into Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service's response during the Covid19 pandemic, and;
  2. That Members agree to receiving a progress update a future FRA meeting.
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### 1. Background

- 1.1. In August 2020, the Home Secretary commissioned Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Police and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) to inspect how fire and rescue authorities in England responded to the COVID-19 outbreak and the numerous challenges it presents. HMICFRS inspected England's 45 fire and rescue services from September to November 2020, focusing on their response during the initial outbreak of the pandemic.
- 1.2. The inspections examined these areas:
  - what is working well and what is being learnt;
  - how the fire and rescue sector is responding to the COVID-19 crisis;
  - how fire and rescue services are dealing with the problems they face; and
  - what changes are likely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 1.3. The inspection covered the first peak of the pandemic, in the period between April to June 2020, with inspection activity undertaken entirely virtually during autumn 2020, when restrictions were easing. Each FRS was asked to supply data covering the period 1 April to 30 June 2020.
- 1.4. A national report was published on 22 January 2021 showing their overall findings on the sector's preparation and response to the pandemic. Each individual fire and rescue service received letters, also published on 22 January 2021, giving detailed findings and focus areas for improvement. HMICFRS gave a narrative rather than a graded judgment in all inspections covered by this inspection, as they had no benchmark to measure against. The national report and individual service letters can be found on the HMICFRS website: <https://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmicfrs/publications/>

## 2. National Report Summary

- 2.1. Overall, the HMICFRS national report 'Responding to the pandemic – The fire and rescue service's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020' (Appendix A) found that fire and rescue services across England responded very well to the pandemic. Services maintained their ability to respond to fires and many services provided pandemic-specific support outside their statutory duties.
- 2.2. This included driving ambulances and delivering essential items to the most vulnerable as well as personal protective equipment to those in healthcare. Firefighters also assisted in moving the bodies of those who died from the virus.
- 2.3. The report found that an agreement put in place between the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC), the fire and rescue service National Employers and the FBU (The Tripartite Agreement) aimed at making provisions for firefighters to do more to support their local communities, became more of a hindrance than a help for some services.
- 2.4. This 'Tripartite' agreement prevented or delayed some chief fire officers from deploying the right people with the right skills to better support communities when they were most in need of help. This was not the case in Bedfordshire where early and regular engagement with Fire Brigades Union officials at the local level enabled a more pragmatic and agile approach than that experienced elsewhere. This helped keep the focus on keeping our staff safe and using our skills, expertise and resources to support our partners in responding to the pandemic.

## 3. Bedfordshire Fire & Rescue Inspection

- 3.1. HMICFRS inspected this Service between 12 and 23 October 2020. All interviews were undertaken virtually and considered alongside the results from an online staff survey to which 124 of our staff responded.
- 3.2. In summary, HMICFRS reported in their letter (Appendix B) that BFRS reacted quickly and proactively to give additional support to partners and the community during the initial phases of the pandemic. It continued to provide the level of activity expected in its response and prevention functions.
- 3.3. They reported the Service was able to respond quickly to staff absences and implemented work to build resilience in our control room. They felt we communicated well with its staff throughout the pandemic, including on issues relating to staff wellbeing, introducing video logs and virtual tea breaks, as well as increasing the frequency of written communication. They also stated we made sure all staff had the resources they needed to do their jobs effectively, including providing extra IT.

- 3.4. However, whilst they acknowledged the Service had developed new ways to give support to businesses, HMICFRS said we were slow to provide the level of protection activity expected. They noted that work was already underway at the time of the inspection to recover from the pause in its risk-based inspection programme.
- 3.5. In recognising the pandemic may carry on for some time and that the Service continues to plan for the future, HMICFRS recommended focusing 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 community risk profiles, of both people and premises, to take account of the changes the pandemic has caused. It should make sure that its prevention and protection activity remains focused on those areas at highest risk;
  - c) It should work with all staff to identify those at higher risk from COVID-19, so it can put appropriate wellbeing and support provisions in place;
  - d) It should consider what steps it needs to take to maintain its risk-based inspection programme through future phases of the pandemic.
- 3.6. Members will note that the data tables in the national report (p28 onwards) listing the tripartite agreement activities carried out by fire and rescues services contains no entries for Bedfordshire. This is due to the Service objecting to supplying data reporting on activities within the scope of the tripartite agreement which the Service did not sign up to due to the constraints it would place on our ability to deploy our resources to meet local needs. Data was supplied to HMICFRS but we specifically requested it not to be reported within the table. Our inspection letter provides more detail explanation of the range of activities undertaken including those outside the scope of tripartite agreement such as introducing co-responding at 3 fire stations and the technical support unit for complex patient rescues based at Dunstable.
- 3.7. Despite the very positive overall findings, an action plan is already in place to address these specific recommendations and provide reassurance to the FRA and HMICFRS that all are being discharged at the earliest opportunity.
- 3.8. HMICFRS have indicated they will follow up on some of the findings from the thematic Covid19 inspections during their second round of service inspections during the spring of 2021. Details of the forthcoming inspections are subject to another presentation to Members on this agenda.

4. Recommendations

1. That Members consider the findings of HMICFRS into Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service's response during the Covid19 pandemic, and;
2. That Members agree to receiving a progress update a future FRA meeting.

5. Implications

**LEGAL**

Legal implications as detailed in the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 and Fire and Rescue National Framework for England 2018.

**ORGANISATIONAL RISK**

The HMICFRS Inspection Report will inform a refresh of the organisational risks identified within the Corporate Risk Register and the associated action plans.

**ANDREW HOPKINSON**  
**DEPUTY CHIEF FIRE OFFICER**