

Paul Fuller CBE QFSM DL
Chief Fire Officer
Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor John Chatterley
Chair
Bedfordshire Fire Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Fuller and Cllr Chatterley,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: BEDFORDSHIRE 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 strategic co-ordinating group of Bedfordshire Local Resilience Forum (LRF) declared a major incident on 23 March 2020.

6. In summary, the service 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. But while it developed new ways

to give support to businesses, it was slow to provide the level of protection activity expected. Work is now underway to recover from the pause in its risk-based inspection programme.

7. Fire and rescue service staff, including firefighters, took on several additional roles to support the needs of their local community. For example, they packaged and delivered around 500 food parcels to vulnerable people, and seconded staff to East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust (EEAST) to drive ambulances and provide driver training. The service was awarded with a gold 'Make a Difference' award from BBC Three Counties Radio for this work.

8. The service was able to respond quickly to staff absences and implemented work to build resilience in its control room. It 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. It also made sure all staff had the resources they needed to do their jobs effectively, including providing extra IT.

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, Bedfordshire 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 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.

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 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.

12. The service devised a concept of operations and gold strategy to reflect the changing situation and what it has learned during the pandemic. These plans outline the strategic direction of the service relating to the pandemic and are regularly reviewed.

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 response, social distancing, making premises 'COVID secure', remote working, personal protective equipment (PPE), test and trace, and service communication.

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 most of 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. However, it stopped pre-planned building inspections in March and didn't implement a process to continue this work remotely until July. Work is now underway to catch up on its risk-based inspection programme. But we are concerned that the service compromised its ability to provide the full range of protection activities expected during the period we are inspecting.

16. To comply with pandemic restrictions, the service changed how it operated. This included providing support virtually, such as giving advice over the telephone and using social media to share fire safety messages.

Response

17. 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.

18. The overall availability of fire engines was broadly the same during the pandemic as it was during the same period in 2019. Between 1 April and 30 June 2020, the service's average overall fire engine availability was 81.1 percent compared with 80.0 percent during the same period in 2019.

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

20. The service told us that its average response time to fires improved during the pandemic compared with the same period in 2019. This was due to better fire engine availability and less road traffic 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.

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

22. This included effective resilience arrangements, such as making sure the control room was 'COVID secure', training more staff for control room roles, and testing fallback arrangements with Essex County Fire and Rescue Service.

Prevention

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

24. The service conducted fewer safe and well visits than it would normally undertake. It didn't review which individuals and groups it considered to be at an increased risk from fire as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

25. The service decided to continue offering face-to-face safe and well visits on a risk-assessed basis, and provided staff with suitable PPE.

26. It introduced the option of a safe and well visit by telephone instead of face-to-face. It also introduced other options including an online referral portal that the public could access via the service's website.

Protection

27. 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. The service was slow to adopt this guidance and, as a result, did not undertake the full range of protection activities required during the initial stage of the pandemic.

28. The service didn't review how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic.

29. The service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it would normally undertake. It decided to pause its risk-based inspection programme from March through June to limit face-to-face activities. In July 2020, 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. It anticipates meeting its performance targets for the year.

30. The service continued with ongoing enforcement activity and issued one prohibition notice. It also continued responding to statutory building control consultations.

31. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact in other areas of work, such as completing a COVID-19 risk assessment prior to attending premises, using telephone or email to make the initial contact and using electronic documents to replace hard-copy letters.

32. However, the overall level of protection activity undertaken is less than we would expect and is not in line with national expectations.

33. 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

34. Staff wellbeing was a clear focus for the service during the pandemic. It had a range of support in place and responded to any concerns and further needs. Senior leaders actively promoted wellbeing services, but more could have been done to talk to staff directly about their individual needs so that the right support could be put in place.

35. 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, virtual coffee breaks, a mental health forum, and external resources such as workshops and a 24-hour helpline. The service has communicated with its staff about how it should plan for the potential longer-term effects of COVID-19 on its workforce.

36. More could have been done to identify and address the specific needs of staff members most at risk from COVID-19, including those from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background and those with underlying health problems, to ensure all members of staff got the tailored support that they may have needed.

37. The service ensured that firefighters were competent to do their work during the pandemic. Local managers monitored firefighter fitness. The service has a plan to ensure that all 2020/21 fitness testing is complete by the end of March 2021.

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

39. 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

40. Absences have decreased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of days or shifts lost due to sickness absence between 1 April and 30 June 2020 decreased by 42 percent compared with the same period in 2019.

41. The service updated its absence procedures 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 and testing. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

Staff engagement

42. 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 video logs with staff about wellbeing and health and safety.

43. The service intends to maintain changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19, including the mental health and wellbeing steering group and virtual ways of communicating.

Working with others, and making changes locally

44. 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.

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 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.

46. The service felt the tripartite agreement put limitations on its ability to support partners and members of the public during the pandemic. The additional activities it undertook therefore fell outside this agreement, even though they included tasks that were covered by it.

47. During the pandemic, the following additional activities were carried out: driving ambulances, assisting vulnerable people, supporting the 'Scrubs for Bedford Hospital' initiative, driving training and instruction, packing and delivering food for vulnerable people, 'co-responding' to medical emergencies, and 'community first' responding. In addition, it hosted flu vaccination clinics and mobile COVID-19 testing sites, which gave it the opportunity to speak to members of the public about fire safety. This generated a number of home safety referrals.

48. The service consulted locally with the FBU to agree most of the additional activities. It also consulted with the Fire and Rescue Services Association on issues that impacted their members. Other staff associations were kept informed, including UNISON.

49. The additional work was agreed on time for it to start promptly and in line with the request from the partner agency.

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

51. The service hasn't yet fully reviewed and evaluated its activities to support other organisations during this period. It has yet to identify which to continue.

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 LRF. Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service is a member of Bedfordshire LRF.

53. The 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.

54. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the service carried out the role of vice chair of the strategic co-ordinating group and chair of the tactical co-ordinating group, supporting the LRF's overall strategy to manage COVID-19. In addition, it chaired the command support cell, for which it provided 12 trained decision loggists to record decisions and their rationale, command support officers and minute takers. It was also a member of the media, volunteers, and health and social care cells. 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. At the time of our inspection, its main extra costs were PPE, cleaning and decontamination supplies, IT infrastructure and licensing, premises changes, implementing a technical support unit, and food hampers for the vulnerable. It fully understands the effect this will have on its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings.

57. The service received £607,000 of extra government funding to support its response. At the time of our inspection, it had spent this money on £261,000 additional staffing costs, £39,000 PPE, £6,000 cleaning and decontamination supplies, £18,000 ICT infrastructure and licensing, £15,000 premises changes, £12,000 implementation of a technical support unit, and £12,000 food hampers for the vulnerable. It has shown how it used this income efficiently, and mitigated the financial risks that arose during this period.

58. The service didn't use any of its reserves to meet the additional costs that arose during this period. This didn't affect its ability to maintain the smooth running of its service during this period.

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

Ways of working

60. The service changed how it operates during the pandemic. For example, it used technology to facilitate virtual ways of working. However, not all staff could access all the systems they needed remotely, and so weren't able to work as effectively as they would like. Where new IT was needed, the service made sure that procurement processes achieved good value for money.

61. 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.

62. 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 into its usual procedures and consider how they can be developed further to help promote a sustainable change to its working culture.

63. The service mostly adopted the guidance available from the NFCC to support its workforce planning, where they were not already working in the recommended manner.

Staffing

64. 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.

65. 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.

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

67. This approach was taken because the service felt this was the best way to ensure it had the resources it needed to meet its foreseeable risk.

68. The on-call workforce took on extra responsibilities covering the shifts of absent wholetime staff and some additional roles.

Governance of the service's response

69. 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.

70. Members of Bedfordshire 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.

71. During the pandemic, the fire and rescue authority maintained some oversight of the service, and was kept informed of decisions it made. The chair maintained regular communication with the chief fire officer and received the service's written briefings.

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

Looking to the future

73. 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.

74. Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service has improved its collaboration with partners. It is now co-responding at two on-call stations. It is co-located with EEAST at three community fire stations, with plans for this to extend to others. In addition, the service has launched a new technical support unit carrying equipment provided by EEAST to assist with bariatric and complex patient incidents. The service has developed joint arrangements with EEAST regarding ambulance servicing and medical training for fire service staff. The service has transformed its use of technology and will continue developing virtual forums and online platforms to support employees and improve its service to members of the public.

75. Good practice and what worked was shared with other services through several routes. This includes regular information exchanges via the NFCC and regional forums. Information shared includes comparison of working arrangements. The service has actively engaged in regional and national debriefs and has worked with an external company and the Office of the Bedfordshire Police and Crime Commissioner to encourage innovation around post-COVID-19 recovery.

Next steps

76. 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 some of our findings.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Zoë Billingham". The signature is written in black ink on a light-colored, textured background.

Zoë Billingham

Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary