

Dr Sabrina Cohen-Hatton
Chief Fire Officer
West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor Duncan Crow
Cabinet Member
West Sussex Fire and Rescue Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Dr Cohen-Hatton and Cllr Crow,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: WEST SUSSEX 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, which 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 for the positive contribution you and your service have made to your community during the pandemic. We inspected your service between 5 October and 16 October 2020. This letter summarises our findings.
5. In relation to your service, Sussex Local Resilience Forum (LRF) declared a major incident on 20 March 2020.
6. In summary, we were impressed by how the service continued to provide its statutory functions and support the wellbeing of staff throughout the pandemic.

7. Our last inspection identified areas of concern. The service has received extra funding from the county council to support improvement and increase its workforce. The increased workforce has helped to make the service more resilient and productive. The service implemented new ways of working to maintain appropriate levels of prevention, protection and response. It gave additional support to the community. Staff visited the most vulnerable people and wore personal protective equipment (PPE) when they made these visits. This meant the people of West Sussex were well supported throughout the pandemic.

8. The service prioritised the wellbeing of its staff and introduced new ways to achieve this. Staff engagement was a priority. The service carried out a staff survey at the start of the pandemic to understand their needs (such as caring responsibilities and the need to shield). It used this information to identify flexible working arrangements to support staff. The service's financial position has not yet been significantly affected by COVID-19. It has invested in virtual meeting platforms to support new ways of working. It has also used technology to give training, and to communicate with staff and the public.

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. In order to be as efficient and effective as possible, West Sussex FRS 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 evaluate how effective its extra activities have been. It should then consider how its activities can give local communities the most benefit in future.

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. They were detailed enough to enable the service to make an effective initial response, but understandably didn't anticipate and mitigate all the risks presented by COVID-19. The service has reviewed its plans to reflect the changing situation and what it has learnt during the pandemic.

11. 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, and supply of PPE.

Fulfilling statutory functions

12. 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.

13. 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. In continuing its prevention and protection work, it has prioritised its work and has done more remotely. It has made safe and well visits to the most vulnerable people in the community. And it has introduced desktop fire safety reviews for high-risk premises.

Response

14. 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.

15. 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 83.1 percent compared with 65.2 percent during the same period in 2019. We were told that this was the result of lower sickness levels among wholetime staff and an increased number of on-call firefighters being available to respond to emergencies due to being furloughed from their primary employment.

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

17. 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 several reasons, including lower sickness levels, better fire engine availability, and less road traffic during this period. 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.

18. The service shares its control room with Surrey Fire and Rescue Service. The two services had adequate arrangements in place so that its joint control room had enough staff during the pandemic.

19. This included effective resilience arrangements, such as training more staff for control room roles, introducing temperature monitoring equipment into the building, and restricting access to the premises to only staff who work there.

Prevention

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

21. 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. Through its work with the LRF, the service shared data on vulnerable people with partner organisations. Prevention staff contacted those people who the service considered to be at high risk from fire. They made initial contact by telephone. Staff only made face-to-face visits if they believed the person was at higher risk.

22. The service decided to continue offering face-to-face safe and well visits because it could give staff suitable PPE. However, it also introduced the option of a safe and well visit by telephone or virtual meeting platform instead of face-to-face safe and well visits. The service followed up the remote contact by posting a fire safety leaflet to the person they had contacted.

Protection

23. The NFCC issued guidance on how to continue protection activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included 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 broadly adopted this guidance.

24. The service didn't review how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic. But it changed its approach. The service initially contacted care home owners to explain that it didn't want to visit in order to reduce the risk of infection. Instead, the service explained fire safety requirements, and gave advice and guidance. During the pandemic, the service re-started fire safety audits in care homes. It did this on a risk-assessed basis.

25. The service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it would normally undertake. It decided to continue face-to-face fire safety audits and enforcement work because it could give staff suitable personal protective equipment. 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.

26. The service continued to issue enforcement notices and prohibition notices. It also continued responding to statutory building control consultations. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as using telephone calls to make the initial contact and completing more desktop assessments. It also updated information on its website, liaised with business associations to give information and guidance, and had fewer staff carrying out visits.

27. 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

28. 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. In March 2020, the service carried out a staff impact survey. The results allowed the service to understand how staff would be impacted by COVID-19. The survey highlighted staff who had caring responsibilities, those who needed to shield, and those who would be supported by flexible working arrangements. The service introduced flexible working patterns to support its staff.

29. 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 peer support. The service used external support, such as specialist counselling, for those staff who were receiving support before the pandemic.

30. Staff most at risk of 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. The service offered an individual risk assessment and issued guidance to managers on how to complete it, including for higher risk members of staff such as those from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background.

31. Wellbeing best practice was also shared with other services. The service doesn't yet intend to discuss with its staff how it should plan for the potential longer-term effects of COVID-19 on its workforce.

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

33. The service provided its workforce with appropriate PPE on time. It participated in local arrangements and the national fire sector scheme to procure PPE, which allowed it to achieve value for money.

Staff absence

34. Absences have decreased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of days lost due to sickness absence between 1 April and 30 June 2020 decreased by 34.8 percent compared with the same period in 2019.

35. 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, and bereavement. 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, written correspondence, one-to-ones with a manager or equivalent, weekly newsletters, weekly video briefings from principal officers, and regular evening briefings from the chief fire officer with staff about wellbeing and health and safety.

37. Most on-call firefighter survey respondents told us that they received either the same amount of, or more, communication than usual during the pandemic. The service made use of telephone, email, social media, messaging services, and virtual meeting platforms when communicating with on-call staff during the pandemic. In addition, the chief fire officer wrote to all on-call firefighters to thank them for their efforts during the pandemic.

38. The service intends to maintain changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19, including its use of virtual meetings; staff have given positive feedback about them. In September 2020, the service conducted an evaluation, asking staff for their views. It intends to use this feedback to inform its future approach.

Working with others, and making changes locally

39. 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.

40. The service carried out the following new activities: in co-ordination with neighbouring fire services, it trained staff to drive ambulances (although they were not required to do so). Staff delivered food and medicine to vulnerable people, delivered PPE, and carried out checks on vulnerable people in their homes.

41. 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.

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

43. There were extra requests for work by partner agencies that fell outside the tripartite agreement, including visiting vulnerable people in their homes to check on their safety, when other organisations were not able to do so. This work was agreed and undertaken on time and in line with the request from the partner agency.

44. All new work, including that done under the tripartite agreement, was risk-assessed and complied with the health and safety requirements. No extra allowance was paid to staff who carried out additional roles.

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

Local resilience forum

46. 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. West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service is a member of Sussex LRF. It 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.

47. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the service was an integral member of the strategic co-ordination group. It was a member of the PPE and vulnerable people sub-groups. The service was able to allocate suitably qualified staff to participate in these groups without affecting its core duties.

Use of resources

48. 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. Its main extra costs were staff overtime. It fully understands the effect this will have on its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings.

49. At the time of our inspection, the service received £14,000 of extra government funding to support its response. It spent this money on staff overtime. It has shown how it used this income efficiently, and that it mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period.

50. The service didn't use any of its reserves to meet the extra costs that arose during this period. When used, overtime was managed appropriately. The service made sure that its staff who worked overtime had enough rest between shifts.

Ways of working

51. The service changed the way in which it operates during the pandemic. For example, it supported staff working from home. Staff could take chairs and IT equipment home to work safely. 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. The service supported staff returning to work in its premises. It made a video, showing the new working arrangements in its buildings. There was an emphasis on showing social distancing arrangements, such as screens and one-way systems.

52. 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.

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

54. 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

55. 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 organisations.

56. 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.

57. As well as performing their statutory functions, wholetime firefighters volunteered for extra activities, including those under the tripartite agreement. 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. Non-operational staff carried out activities agreed in the tripartite agreement. We expect services to keep their processes under review to make sure they use their wholetime workforces as productively as possible. 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.

58. The on-call workforce took on extra responsibilities covering most of the roles agreed as part of the tripartite agreement and the shifts of absent wholetime staff.

Governance of the service's response

59. 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.

60. Members of West Sussex 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.

61. The fire and rescue authority maintained effective ways of working with the service during the pandemic. This made sure the service could fulfil its statutory duties as well as its extra work supporting the LRF and the tripartite arrangements. The fire and rescue authority put arrangements in place to give its members relevant and regular information about how the service responded to the pandemic. It made use of technology and held meetings virtually.

62. During the pandemic, the fire and rescue authority continued to give the service proportionate oversight and scrutiny, including of its decision-making process. It did this by regularly communicating with the chief fire officer and receiving the service's written briefings.

Looking to the future

63. 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.

64. West Sussex FRS has improved how it works with other organisations during the pandemic. This includes its work with representative bodies and the LRF.

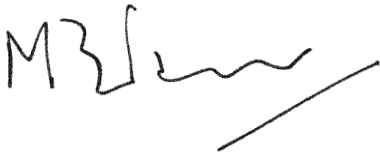
65. The health and wellbeing of the workforce is a priority for the service. It has offered flexible working arrangements, where possible, to accommodate any personal requirements and to support safe working practices. The service has invested in virtual meeting platforms to support new ways of working, provide training, and communicate with staff and the public. The service carried out an internal evaluation process to capture learning from all members of staff. This learning includes wellbeing as well as operational issues. It set up the Reset and Reboot group to consider how to use this learning in the future.

66. Good practice and what worked was shared with other services through the NFCC. The service met regularly with neighbouring services before the pandemic. The established working groups continued to meet virtually to share information in the initial stages of the pandemic. Staff met with counterparts to share information on prevention, protection and staff wellbeing. These meetings discussed best practice and how to apply NFCC guidance.

Next steps

67. 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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'MP' followed by a stylized flourish and a diagonal line.

Matt Parr CB

Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary