



Local Government Act 1972

A Meeting of the Combined Fire Authority for County Durham and Darlington will be held in the Remote Meeting - This meeting is being held remotely via Microsoft Teams on Friday 19 February 2021 at 10.00 am. to consider the following business:-

PART A

1. Declarations of interest, if any

If Members are aware of a private or personal conflict of interest in relation to any items on the Agenda, this should be disclosed at this stage or when the conflict of interest arises during consideration of an item in accordance with the Code of Conduct for Members.

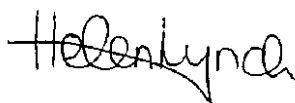
2. Minutes of the meetings held on 15 December 2020 and 19 January 2021 (Pages 3 - 10)
3. Current Correspondence - Report of Assistant Chief Fire Officer - Service Support (Pages 11 - 40)
4. Notes of the Finance Committee - Report of Chair (Pages 41 - 42)
5. Budget 2021/22 Report under Section 25 of Local Government Act 2003 - Report of Treasurer (Pages 43 - 46)
6. 2021/22 Revenue Budget and Council Tax, Capital Programme and Medium-Term Financial Plan - Report of Treasurer and Chief Fire Officer (Pages 47 - 94)
7. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services Covid-19 Inspection Outcome - Report of Area Manager Training, Assets and Assurance (Pages 95 - 150)
8. Such other business as, in the opinion of the Chairman of the meeting, is of sufficient urgency to warrant consideration
9. Any resolution relating to the exclusion of the public during the discussion of items containing exempt information

PART B

Items during which it is considered the meeting will not be open to the public (consideration of exempt or confidential information)

10. Covid-19 Update - Report of the Chief Fire Officer (Pages 151 - 196)
11. Estates Update - Report of the Head of Corporate Resources (Pages 197 - 200)
12. Such other business as, in the opinion of the Chairman of the meeting, is of sufficient urgency to warrant consideration

PURSUANT to the provisions of the above named Act, **I HEREBY SUMMON YOU** to attend the said meeting



H LYNCH

Clerk to the Combined Fire Authority
for County Durham and Darlington

County Hall
Durham
DH1 5UL

TO: The Members of the Combined Fire Authority for County Durham and Darlington

Durham County Councillors:

Councillors B Avery, A Batey, D Bell, J Bell, R Bell, C Carr, D Freeman, D Hicks, A Laing, L Maddison, J Maitland, R Manchester, L Marshall, C Potts, G Richardson, J Robinson, E Scott, J Shuttleworth, D Stoker, F Tinsley and J Turnbull.

Darlington Borough Councillors:

Councillors H Crumbie, B Jones, G Lee and A J Scott.

At a **meeting** of the **Combined Fire Authority for County Durham and Darlington** held remotely, on **Tuesday 15 December 2020** at 10.00 am.

Present:

Durham County Councillors:

Councillors B Avery, A Batey, D Bell, R Bell, M Clarke, L Kennedy, A Laing, L Maddison, R Manchester, L Marshall, C Potts, J Robinson, E Scott, J Shuttleworth and J Turnbull.

Darlington Borough Councillors:

Councillors H Crumbie, B Jones, G Lee and A Scott

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Bell, C Carr, D Freeman, D Hicks, J Maitland, G Richardson, D Stoker, F Tinsley

Independent Person:

A Simpson and N Johnson

The Chair welcomed all to the remote live meeting.

The Chair greeted everyone with the following message:

“On behalf of the Vice Chair, Audrey, Chief Fire Officer, Stuart, Deputy Chief Fire Officer, Steve, the Senior Leadership Team and myself, we all wish to express our wishes for a very Happy and Merry Christmas to everyone, and for 2021 to wish everyone a healthy and prosperous New Year, and more importantly a Safe New year to you and all your family and friends.”

The Chair was delighted to announce the Service has won the Accenture Award for Recruitment Excellence at the National Apprenticeship Awards. This comes on the back of the Regional award that was announced last week and is a real accolade for the scheme. The Chair and the Vice Chair thanked all those who had assisted in the work of the ground breaking apprenticeship scheme.

A1 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

A2 Minutes of the Meeting held on 12 November 2020

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 November 2020 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair (for copy see file of minutes).

A3 Current Correspondence

The Authority received an update from the Assistant Chief Fire Officer in relation to current correspondence received from government and other bodies relevant to the Authority and the status of each (for copy see file of minutes).

A4 Notes of the Performance Committee 24 November 2020

The Authority received a report to provide members with an updated on the discussion and recommendations of the Performance Committee held on 24 November 2020(for copy see file of minutes).

The Chair thanked Councillor Manchester for way in which he has chaired the committee

Resolved:

The contents of the report were noted.

A5 Performance Report – Quarter Two 2020/21

The Authority considered a report of the Area Manager, Community Risk Management which provided members with a summary of organisational performance at the end of the second quarter of the 2020/21 financial year (for copy see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the contents of the report be noted.

A6 Bonfire Period Activity 2020

The Authority were shown a presentation by the Area Manager, Community Risk Management which provided members a brief analytical overview of key facts, information, and activity over the annual bonfire period within County Durham, and Darlington (for copy see file of minutes).

The Chair asked if every member of staff who has been involved could be thanked.

Councillor Laing asked if we had the statistics available on the age group of young people who may be causing the problems identified. This information is not currently available. Information to be provided to the Fire Authority specifically on the areas of concern (High Handenhold and Peterlee).

Councillor Batey echoed concerns that residents need to understand the impact Bonfire Night had on the particular fire stations.

Resolved:

That the contents of the presentation be noted

A7 Update on Retained Duty System (RDS) Activities

The Authority considered a report from Councillor Shuttleworth as the Member Champion for Retained Duty Service (RDS) which provided members with an update and insight into the business areas and performance of the RDS with County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service.

Resolved:

That the contents of the report be noted.

A8 Fire Standards Board

The Authority considered a report of the Assistant Chief Fire Officer which provided members with an update on the Fire Standards Board's progress in developing national Fire Standards.

Resolved:

- a) That the contents of the report be noted
- b) Received further reports as appropriate

A9 Staffing Arrangements at Seaham and Newton Aycliffe

The Authority considered a report of the Deputy Chief Fire Officer which provided members with an update on the staffing arrangements at Seaham and Newton Aycliffe fire stations, following the Combined Fire Authority decision on the 21 September 2020 to introduce a Day Crewing style duty system, in line with the 2020/21 Integrated Risk Management Plan, providing a collective agreement could be negotiated with the Fire Brigades Union.

Resolved:

That the contents of the report be noted.

A10 Fire and Rescue Incident Statistics: England, April 2019 to March 2020

The Authority considered a report of the Area Manager, Community Risk Management to present a comparative analysis of key operational indicators within County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service against national performance data contained within one of the national reports published annually by the Home Office.

Councillor R Bell asked about the Service being the 10th busiest service in the country per 100,000 population. He queried which of all the stats are important in feeding into the funding model / feeding into what Inspectorate looks at / are some more important than others. For interest what do others do with the stats. The Area Manager outlined our population and explained this was a comparison. The Chief Fire Officer explained the stats do not necessarily feature within the current funding models, however, they presented an opportunity for lobbying around funding and also were used by the Service to explain the context in which we operate to the Inspectorate.

Councillor J Shuttleworth, regarding Item 18 and 5.2% more deliberate fires within the area asked where the deliberate fires were occurring. The Area Manager Community Risk Management confirmed the location of primary fires to the largest number being from the east coast.

Cllr H Crumbie informed members that Safe and Well Being Visits are having a positive impact in Darlington and helping to combat a rise in mental health issues with the community.

Resolved:

That the contents of the report be noted and discussed.

A11 Spending Review 2020

The Authority considered a report of the Deputy Chief Executive to inform members of the outcome of the Spending Review 2020 (SR20) and possible implications for the Authority.

Resolved:

That the contents of the report be noted and the outcome of the SR20 and the possible implications for the Authority.

A12 Any other business

There was no other business.

A13 Exclusion of the public

That under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraphs 3 and 4 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the said Act.

PART B

The Chief Fire Officer gave the members an update on the progress of Darlington Station, Training Centre and Sedgefield Fire Station. The Chief Fire Officer thanked all members for their support throughout the current estate's projects.

Councillor A Batey asked if a walk-through video of the projects could be created for everyone. All agreed.

B14 Fire Fatality

The Authority considered a presentation of Area Manager Assets and Assurance which provided members with an overview of the Fire Fatality in Chilton in November 2020.

Councillor Potts asked to pass on her thank to all the crews who were in attendance and hoped all crew members are okay following this incident.

Resolved:

That the contents of the presentation are noted.

B15 Any Other Business

There was no other business.

CLOSE OF MEETING

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At a **special meeting** of the **Combined Fire Authority for County Durham and Darlington** held remotely, on **Tuesday 19 January 2021 at 1700 hours**

Present:

Durham County Councillors:

Councillors B Avery, A Batey, D Bell, R Bell, D Hicks, A Laing, L Maddison, R Manchester, L Marshall, C Potts, G Richardson, J Robinson, E Scott, J Shuttleworth, D Stoker, F Tinsley and J Turnbull.

Darlington Borough Councillors:

Councillors H Crumbie, B Jones, G Lee and A Scott

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors C Carr.

Independent Person:

N Johnson

The Chair welcomed all to the remote live special meeting.

The Chair passed on best wishes from himself and members to all staff and their families who had been affected by Covid-19.

The Chair congratulated Connor Moir on his achievement of being ranked in the top 2% of fire service apprentices in the country.

The Chair invited members to agree to write to the Home Office Minister to request that the Fire Services be included within the emergency services to be considered for priority vaccinations. This was proposed by the Chair and seconded by the Vice Chair.

Resolved

- a) It was agreed that a letter would be sent to the Home Office Minister to request that Fire Services be included within the emergency services for priority vaccinations.

The Chair congratulated the Chief Fire Officer on his Queen's Fire Service Medal which has awarded in the Queen's New Years Honours. S Errington thanked the members for their support in his role.

A1 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

A2 Community Risk Management Plan – 2021 - 2024

The Authority considered a report of the Chief Fire Officer which provided members with details of the 2021 – 2024 Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP), the proposals contained within the plan and the public consultation that would be undertaken (for copy see file of minutes).

Resolved:

- a) The contents of the report be noted,
- b) The questions to put to the public in the consultation document as shown in paragraph 15 of the report were approved.

A3 Any other business

There was no other business.

CLOSE OF MEETING



Current Correspondence: December 2020 – February 2021

Release Date	Subject	Summary	Action CFA Report	Action CFA Response	Action Info
13/01/2021	Circular EMP/1/21	Circular providing an update on the NJC COVID Support Agreement. Appendix 1.			√
14/01/2021	Letter from Zoe Billingham	Letter providing an update on the commencement of Round 2 of Fire and Rescue Service Inspections. Appendix 2.			√
14/01/2021	Letter from Rt. Hon. Priti Patel MP and Lord Greenhalgh, Minister of State for Building Safety, Fire and Communities	Letter of thanks for the support given by the Fire and Rescue Service in response to Covid 19 and a request for volunteers to support mass testing and vaccination efforts. Appendix 3.			√
18/01/2021	Letter from Sir Thomas Winsor WS, HMICFRS	Letter outlining the HMICFRS Inspection Activity 2020/21. Appendix 4.			√
22/01/2021	Circular EMP/2/21	COVID Support FAQ's document to assist communications with staff and others. Appendix 5.			√

28/01/2021	Circular EMP/3/21	Correspondence between Matt Wrack, General Secretary of the FBU and Cllr Nick Chard, Chair of the National Employers regarding the position of COVID Support Arrangements. Appendix 6.			√
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18 Smith Square, Westminster,
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Telephone 020 7187 7335
e-mail: firequeries@local.gov.uk
Employers' Secretary, Naomi Cooke

FIRE & RESCUE SERVICES National Employers

Direct Dial
020 7187 7335

Website: www.local.gov.uk

**To: Chief Fire Officers
Chief Executives/Clerks to Fire Authorities
Chairs of Fire Authorities
Directors of Human Resources**

CC: Members of the Employers' Side of the NJC

13th January 2021

CIRCULAR EMP/1/21

COVID Support Agreement

1. FRAs will be aware that the NJC Covid Support Agreement had a one-month term (to Monday 11th January): The agreement stated:

'This interim agreement will operate for up to one month (until Monday 11th January 2021) and will ensure that the additional work activities will continue to remain available to those FRA/FRSs who utilise this agreement.'

'This will allow time for a review of testing arrangements and/or the availability of vaccination for Grey Book personnel to take place with a view to identifying an alternative approach to the non-attendance at a fire service premises for 3 days pending a test and a negative result in that test, which currently relates to a risk assessment control measure for ambulance driving/working as part of an ambulance crew activities, those activities delivered within care homes, face fitting where the activity takes place in a care home or hospital and handling of dead bodies. Should the review successfully conclude, or vaccination for Grey Book personnel become available, sooner than 11th January the alternative approach will take effect at that time.'

2. Intensive discussions have been taking place over the past month.
3. The National Employers' have consistently said that they regard the content of risk assessments (RAs) as an operational matter and accordingly they would look to the NFCC for development and advice. That is not to set aside employer responsibilities to employees in terms of health and safety but in recognition that such documents need to be drafted by people competent to do so and that such matters are normally dealt with at local level by senior management and through the local health and safety process, both of which would still need to apply. That position has been maintained.
4. At the employers' request, the NFCC reviewed the current risk assessments for the affected activities (e.g. ambulance driving) in the context of identifying an alternative control measure and worked with specialist advisers drawn from each of the four National Employer stakeholders. Following consultation with CFOs, the FBU and other fire service unions the NFCC provided a set of RAs in relation to the affected activities which could replace the existing ones. Advice continued to be sought from the NFCC thereafter.

5. The NFCC identified alternative control measure is one of parity. In essence, this would mean that whatever the testing arrangements are for the employees of the partner agency with overall responsibility for the specific activity, they would equally apply to the fire service employees involved. If not, the fire service would not take part in the activity. The NFCC did not anticipate any supply problems with the tests. The specialist advisers to the National Employers supported this approach. Accordingly, the National Employers were assured that the revised best practice RAs are suitable and sufficient.
6. Discussion with the FBU, through the NJC, identified a number of areas of disagreement in respect of agreeing an outcome to the review referred to in paragraph 1 above. While we believe a number of the employees' side concerns could be accommodated, key differences remained:
 - (a) A general employees' side concern about the concept of parity - automatically applying it to fire service employees (querying what happens if it is reduced) and a desire to see a pre-set minimum standard on testing such as twice a week.

A pre-set minimum would be inconsistent with the principle of parity and therefore could not be agreed. However, based on NFCC advice, an appendix could be added to the RAs of the affected activities which would list the health surveillance arrangements in place as at 1 Jan 2021. Reassurance that the status of the content was unaffected could be set out in the NJC agreement.

In respect of any indicated reduction to that set out in the respective appendix, it was suggested that it would be possible to agree it would trigger the NJC seeking a further review to ensure the new arrangements were still satisfactory to the fire service.
 - (b) The employees' side queried whether testing would continue for 10 days after an activity is concluded to further protect the fire service workplace. Following discussion with the NFCC this was added to the affected RAs. We were advised by the NFCC that this would not lead to supply problems. But in the extremely unlikely case that it did, the specific activity/activities would not be undertaken unless sufficient tests had been secured for this too.
 - (c) The employees' side suggested that isolation from the workplace should remain as an alternative/s. Employers' side members were clear that based upon the advice they had received from the NFCC and employer advisers the existing control measure - not returning to the FRS workplace until such time as tested after 3 days and then return to work when negative – is no longer sustainable or appropriate. This view was strengthened by the position in the 'new' affected risk assessments which would mean an activity simply would not happen if the parity control measure was not in place. Furthermore, any variation on isolation is no longer necessary given the much-improved position around availability of testing since the original control measure was agreed many months ago.
7. Firefighters are currently not a priority group for vaccination and therefore at this time it cannot be included as another alternative control measure. NFCC advice is that another advantage of parity is that given health workers are to be prioritised for vaccination therefore parity would mean firefighters should also be included.

Conclusion:

8. Based on NFCC and employer adviser advice our understanding is that a suitable and sufficient alternative control measure has been identified. The employees' side does not agree.

9. It has therefore not been possible to identify a mutually acceptable alternative control measure for the affected activities that would enable continuation of the national agreement. Technically that agreement ended at midnight on 11th January and while the employers' side was keen to be able to agree continuation and hence continued discussion past that time there is a need to now provide certainty to FRAs and FRSs so that they can proceed with planning for current and new priorities as soon as possible and why we need to advise you today that discussions have not been successful.
10. Unfortunately, non-agreement also means discussions about adding new activities relating to community mass testing and community mass vaccination cannot be progressed at national level. This need not hinder progress at local level and the National Employers are pleased that those best practice risk assessments have also been developed, which will support services to help their communities as soon as possible.
11. A copy of the National Employers' media statement is **attached**.
12. The Employers' Side preference of course remains to move forward by agreement.

Yours faithfully,



Gill Gittins
Assistant Employers' Secretary

Last month the FBU effectively withdrew from an agreement on COVID support that had been in place since March between the National Employers, National Fire Chiefs Council and Fire Brigades Union.

That agreement had ensured the fire service could provide assistance to communities through support to partner agencies such as the NHS, ambulance trusts and councils.

In an attempt to ensure there was no impact on the vital support provided to date, the National Joint Council for Local Authority Fire and Rescue Services intervened hoping to find a mutually agreeable alternative way forward over the following month.

This intervention sought to replace the recommendation to consider isolation with regular testing, recognising the impact that an unnecessary period of isolation would have on workforce availability and ultimately the fire and rescue service's ability to assist in its response to the pandemic. In discussions the employers informed by the National Fire Chiefs Council and employer advisers, suggested that services adopted the same health surveillance measures (including regular testing) as that afforded to our partners in Health and Social Care.

The safety of firefighters remains paramount. No firefighter would be asked to volunteer to undertake any new activity without suitable training, equipment, and a robust risk assessment process in place. To reinforce this commitment, the risk assessments were shared with the Health and Safety Executive as part of the process of review as will any subsequent changes.

The National Employers have worked together with the National Fire Chiefs Council as the professionals best placed to develop appropriate best practice risk assessments, this enables us to meet our responsibilities to employees in terms of health and safety. The NFCC in turn had the relevant individuals in place with qualifications and experience and has the support of Chief Fire Officers and relevant employer advisers across the UK. Consultation has taken place with fire service trade unions. Any local variation to the best practice assessments would be made when reviewed through the usual local health and safety process and the necessary production of specific local risk assessments.

Availability of testing is now much improved from when the original assessments were drafted many months ago. They are now readily available so we are much better placed to be able to respond without the necessity to isolate. The announcement that the Home Office have secured priority access for the fire and rescue service further supports this position.

The focus has therefore been on ensuring that firefighters will also be able to take full advantage of that progress and to make sure they are treated equally to employees of the relevant partner agency. In the unlikely event that is not possible then it is clear firefighters would not take part in the relevant activity.

The expectation is that such parity would also mean prioritising vaccination of firefighters to the same level as others undertaking such activities such as medical staff. This has been made clear by the National Fire Chief's Council throughout the discussions.

However, that reassurance appears not sufficient and unfortunately following discussions with the Fire Brigades Union, the National Employers are saddened and very disappointed that it has not been possible to reach on-going agreement with the FBU.

Cllr Nick Chard, the Chair of the National Employers said,

“We are grateful to, and proud of, all the staff who have volunteered to support the COVID response. They do so safely and effectively, providing assistance where it is most needed, we urge them to continue to do so, having been afforded the same personal protective equipment and health surveillance arrangements (testing) as that afforded to others. We are frustrated that agreement with the FBU cannot continue and believe that personnel who have participated voluntarily in this critical COVID support will be frustrated too as will our partner organisations.

We will continue to prioritise the safety of firefighters and provide the best service to the public; we will also continue to ensure the fire service plays its role in supporting the UK’s response to the COVID pandemic with support from those willing to do so including with community mass testing and mass vaccination programmes and the provision of response drivers to our ambulance service colleagues who are coming under increasing pressure.

Note to editors

1. The National Joint Council for Local Authority Fire and Rescue Services (the NJC) is the body responsible for the supervision, from a national point of view, of all questions affecting the conditions of service of employees within its scope ranging from firefighters to middle management. It covers England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
2. To date fire and rescue services have provided:
 - 111,000 essential items delivered to the most vulnerable people
 - Assembly of 68,135 single use facemasks
 - 25,000 deliveries of PPE
 - 4,125 face masks fitted for frontline NHS and clinical care staff
 - 22,500 food parcels were packed
 - Assistance with taking more than 1000 antigen samples
 - Transporting 1,446 COVID patients and 3,337 non-COVID patients to hospital
 - Supported the Ambulance Service on 87,206 occasions - driving and personnel support
 - Training for external staff to drive ambulances
 - Assistance with movement of more than 2000 bodies

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Zoë Billingham BA Hons (Oxon)
Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary
Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire and Rescue
Services

Chief fire officers
Chairs of fire authorities
Police, fire and crime commissioners
Police and crime commissioners
Lead fire authority members
Locally elected mayors
Other FRS interested parties

14 January 2021

Dear Colleague,

FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE INSPECTIONS UPDATE

I wish you a happy new year in these very difficult circumstances. I write to provide further information about our plans for starting the second round of fire and rescue service (FRS) inspections. This includes how we plan to respond to the most recent round of restrictions and additional demands on services.

Round 2

2. I wrote on 27 November 2020 to inform services of their tranche allocation. We all knew the pandemic was likely to continue over the winter period, and the new national lockdown that is now in place means that we have reconsidered our plans. Sir Thomas Winsor will be writing out to all inspected bodies shortly to set out our decision to continue with remote inspection activity only while these restrictions are in place.

3. We recognise the continuing effect the pandemic is having on services. We spoke to colleagues in the NFCC and those chiefs whose inspections are planned for early in tranche one about whether it is reasonable and practical to carry on and received a universally positive response. We are very grateful for their support for continuing inspection.

4. We will continue our inspection programme albeit, in an appropriately modified way for the time being. All inspection activity we do carry out will be done remotely until the current restrictions lift. We will extend the inspection window and we will be flexible about our deadlines for evidence returns on a case by case basis. We will speak to each chief fire officer nearer their inspection to discuss how we can complete it in the least disruptive way, including when restrictions change.

5. We intend to reassess the position for the first tranche of inspections in mid-February. When we do, we will speak to the services in that tranche to determine whether further changes to the inspection schedule or approach are necessary. **Annex A** sets out more detail about our inspection plans. **Annex B** explains our approach to virtual and on-site evidence gathering. This should result in a less disruptive inspection because we will be able to spread virtual activity over a longer window to better accommodate individual service's availability. We are grateful to our external reference group members for their support in developing this approach.

6. When life returns a greater degree of normality, hopefully by the summer, we will still continue to minimise the time we spend on-site in those services scheduled for later tranches and also make more use of virtual inspection methods.

Document and self-assessment request

7. Our document request for tranche one services will be issued w/c 18 January 2021. For tranche one services who had submitted their documents at the beginning of round two at the start of last year, there is no need to resubmit documents that have not changed.

8. Please ask your service liaison lead to talk to your service liaison officer to determine which of these documents will need to be resubmitted.

9. The self-assessment template has been adjusted to provide you with the opportunity to give an update about the action you are taking following the Covid-19 inspection. This is so that we can give credit for any improvements that have been made within your next inspection report.

Staff survey and independent reporting line

10. As with the first round of inspections, we will be conducting a staff survey for all staff that work for English fire and rescue services. We do not consider the staff survey in isolation, and the results will be used as a measure of service performance and to triangulate further evidence obtained during inspection.

11. This survey will be circulated prior to each service inspection, starting in February 2021 preceding the first tranche of inspections. We rely on your help to promote this survey and I would be very grateful for anything you could do to encourage your staff to complete this survey. This helps to ensure we have a good representation of your staff's views.

12. Our independent reporting line also remains open to all fire and rescue service staff in England. The purpose of this line is to provide staff with a mechanism to inform us of any issues, and areas of good practice, which they feel should be taken into consideration both prior to and during inspection. This is not a whistleblowing service, or a route for complaints to be resolved. It is simply a way in which to gather additional evidence outside of fieldwork. Link to the independent reporting line can be found [here](#).

Short term secondees

14. As with round one of our inspections, we are keen to continue to draw on the expertise of the sector by deploying short term secondees on the inspection of your services. This would mean releasing staff to work for us on a remote basis for approximately 4-6 weeks, arranged for a time convenient for both side. I recognise that many services will not be able to support this arrangement at the moment due to your ongoing response to the pandemic, but this is something that will cover the whole inspection programme. These individuals will enjoy the benefit from taking part in inspection activity periodically, without being seconded away from their service for two years.

15. We will launch a formal recruitment process in due course with more details of what this would entail. In the meantime, I encourage you to consider who within your organisation demonstrates the best of the sector, and who would benefit from such an opportunity as part of your work to develop talented staff.

Forthcoming publications

16. We intend to publish three reports over the coming months.

(a) Covid-19 – national report and 44 service reports: reports will all be published **00:01 Friday 22 January 2021**. Services will be provided an embargoed copy of their final report 24-48 hours prior to publication.

(b) London Fire Brigade/Grenfell Tower Inquiry phase 1 recommendations report: **10 February 2021**; and

(c) State of Fire and Rescue 2020: early March 2021 (tbc).

Proposed events

17. We think it will be helpful to convene a chiefs and chairs meeting to talk you through our plans for round 2 and answer any questions that you may have. We therefore propose to hold a virtual session in the morning of **Monday 25 January**. This will follow a similar format to the session we held before our Covid-19 inspections. A Teams invite will be sent later today. We recognise the demands placed upon chief fire officers and services, so we're happy for this invite to be delegated as required.

18. In collaboration with the NFCC, we will also hold an event for service liaison officers. This is planned for Thursday 28 January. The NFCC will send invites later this week.

19. If you require any further information then please do not hesitate to contact either me or Laura Gibb, the portfolio director via (LauraAlice.Gibb@hmicfrs.gov.uk).

20. Thank you again for your continued support of our inspection programme during what we all appreciate is a very difficult time for you, your families and your colleagues.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Zoë Billingham". The signature is written in a cursive style and is contained within a light grey rectangular box.

Zoë Billingham

HM Inspector of Constabulary

HM Inspector of Fire and Rescue Services

ANNEX A – ROUND 2 TIMEFRAME

Tranche 1:

FRS	Document and self-assessment request	Inspection activity starts	Publication
Cheshire	w/c 18 Jan 2021 – w/c 15 Feb 2021	w/c 22 Feb	Winter 2021
Cambridgeshire	w/c 18 Jan 2021 – w/c 15 Feb 2021	w/c 22 Feb	Winter 2021
Bedfordshire	w/c 18 Jan 2021 – w/c 15 Feb 2021	w/c 22 Feb	Winter 2021
Warwickshire	w/c 18 Jan 2021 – w/c 15 Feb 2021	w/c 1 Mar	Winter 2021
Cornwall	w/c 18 Jan 2021 – w/c 15 Feb 2021	w/c 29 Mar	Winter 2021
Surrey	w/c 18 Jan 2021 – w/c 15 Feb 2021	w/c 29 Mar	Winter 2021

Decision about inspection schedule mid-February 2021

Lincolnshire	w/c 18 Jan 2021	w/c 5 Apr	Winter 2021
Hereford & Worcestershire	w/c 18 Jan 2021	w/c 12 Apr	Winter 2021
Merseyside	w/c 18 Jan 2021	w/c 10 May	Winter 2021
Avon	w/c 18 Jan 2021	w/c 10 May	Winter 2021
Buckinghamshire	w/c 18 Jan 2021	w/c 24 May	Winter 2021
Essex	w/c 18 Jan 2021	w/c 24 May	Winter 2021
Greater Manchester	w/c 18 Jan 2021	w/c 07 Jun	Winter 2021
Northumberland	w/c 18 Jan 2021	w/c 07 Jun	Winter 2021

Tranche 2:

Document and self-assessment request: May/June 2021

Fieldwork: September 2021 - February 2022

Publication: Summer 2022

Tranche 3:

Document and self-assessment request: January 2022

Fieldwork: March - September 2022

Publication: Winter 2022

ANNEX B – FLEXIBLE INSPECTION APPROACH

Suitable for virtual	SLL/SLO assessment	Not suitable
<p>Data collection</p> <p>Reporting line</p> <p>Survey</p> <p>Document review</p> <p>Self-assessment</p> <p>Strategic engagement</p> <p>Interviews</p>	<p>Desk-top process walkthroughs</p> <p>Work-place system/case review</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Screen sharing • Remote access • Data download • On-site <p>Focus groups</p>	<p>Control room & station reality testing</p> <p>Work-place system testing</p> <p>Work-place knowledge checks</p>

BY EMAIL ONLY

To:
Chief Fire Officers
Chairs of Fire and Rescue Authorities
Police, Fire and Crime Commissioners
Roy Wilsher, National Fire Chiefs' Council

14 January 2021

All,

Response to Covid-19 – Support by Fire and Rescue Services

We continue to be hugely thankful for the hard work of everyone in Fire and Rescue Services – both firefighters and staff – during the Covid-19 pandemic. We want to take this opportunity to again extend our thanks for the leadership you have all shown during this period.


The work that firefighters and staff have done has been critical to the response to the pandemic. We have heard many amazing examples of what has been achieved and spoken to frontline staff about the work they have done. A consistent theme has been how committed and proud they are to support people in need. It goes without saying that we share your collective commitment to put the safety of staff at the centre of this effort whilst doing all you can to help save lives and protect the NHS.

We support you in encouraging your firefighters and staff to continue to undertake this important work, particularly in providing support to local authorities, the NHS and Ambulance Trusts. The next phase of mass testing and the roll out of the vaccination programme is critical. As Chief Fire Officers told Lord Greenhalgh last week – this is an all hands to the pump moment and supporting mass testing and vaccine deployment should be a key community safety focus for Fire and Rescue Services. We ask you to find as many volunteers across your service as possible and to encourage them to support mass testing and vaccination efforts across the country.

For the first phase of the vaccine rollout, the Government is rightly prioritising the elderly and clinically extremely vulnerable, alongside front-line healthcare workers. However, we are continuing to work with our ministerial colleagues, to ensure that the role Fire and Rescue Services continue to provide in supporting the pandemic response is recognised in the continuing discussions on prioritisation for the next phases of the rollout.

HMICFRS have inspected all Services' performance during the pandemic and we look forward to seeing their findings when the reports are published this month. The Home Office will continue to support Fire and Rescue Authorities that have taken on additional Covid-19 related duties through the Fire Covid-19 Contingency Fund. Following first payments from the fund in December, the Contingency Fund has just been re-opened for a second round of applications and will remain open until 14 February. The fund eligibility criteria have been widened, so that in some instances Fire and Rescue Authorities may also be able to claim money for other additional Covid-19 related costs, such as overtime and on-call costs to support core functions, PPE items and cleaning. We would like to encourage all eligible services to apply and to get in touch with our officials in case of any questions.

This, as the Prime Minister has said, is the most critical phase of the pandemic. I know you will do all you can to ensure Fire and Rescue Services play their part in responding to this. On behalf of the British people, we thank you.

With our good wishes


Rt. Hon. Priti Patel MP



**Lord Greenhalgh
Minister of State for Building Safety,
Fire and Communities**



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

6th Floor, Globe House,
89 Eccleston Square, London SW1V 1PN
Direct Line: 020 3513 0521
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Sir Thomas Winsor ws
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Fire and
Rescue Services

Chief Constables
Chief Fire Officers
Police and Crime Commissioners
Police, Fire and Crime Commissioners
Chief Executives
Chairs of Fire & Rescue Authorities
Lead Fire and Rescue Authority Members
Locally elected Mayors

18 January 2021

Dear Colleagues,

HMICFRS INSPECTION ACTIVITY 2020/21

On 6 November 2020, I wrote to you to advise you about how we expected to continue our work in light of the announcement about restrictions as a result of the pandemic. This letter provides you with a further update following the recent announcements by the Prime Minister and the devolved administrations.

2. Following those recent announcements, HMICFRS Board members considered a number of factors including the demand on our inspected sectors, the reported higher transmission rates of the virus variants, and the progress made with remote inspection activity over previous months.
3. The Board decided that in-person inspection activity should be suspended. Where possible and until 22 February 2021, planned inspections will continue using virtual methods only. Virtual inspection activity will be discussed with each force or service in advance, but the presumption is that it will continue.
4. Exceptions will of course exist, and I do not underestimate the difficulties you face as you continue to provide a vital service amidst the circumstances caused by the pandemic. Where particular difficulties are faced or where inspection activity requires appreciable input that is not sustainable or practicable, discussions can take place with your regional HMI. Decisions on whether to suspend planned virtual inspection activity will be taken on a case-by-case basis by the inspectorate.
5. It is important that we try to conduct as much virtual inspection activity as is possible in a way that supports our inspected sectors, and ultimately contributes to the service provided to the public. This evolving environment may become our new normal. I of course recognise the need to continue to adapt and be flexible whilst still contributing to the effectiveness and efficiency of police forces and fire and rescue services, in the public interest.
6. My Board colleagues and I will continue to discuss inspection plans against the changing operational circumstances to ensure they remain appropriate. Our inspection planning for 2021/22

continues, with a presumption of the full programme being implemented, pending approval by the Home Secretary, from 1 April 2021.

7. Once again, I offer my thanks and appreciation for your commitment during these changing times.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tom Winsor', written in a cursive style.

Sir Thomas Winsor WS

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Fire and Rescue Services

Copied to: HMIs Home Office NFCC Chair NPCC Chair

DG, National Crime Agency LGA APCC

CEO, College of Policing Criminal Justice Chief Inspectors

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Employers' Secretary, Naomi Cooke

**FIRE & RESCUE SERVICES
National Employers**

Direct Dial
020 7187 7335

Website: www.local.gov.uk/

**To: Chief Fire Officers
Chief Executives/Clerks to Fire Authorities
Chairs of Fire Authorities
Directors of Human Resources**

CC: Members of the Employers' Side of the NJC

22nd January 2021

CIRCULAR EMP/2/21

COVID Support

1. Circular EMP/1/21, issued on 13th January, informed you of the position in respect of the national COVID support discussions.
2. Attached to this circular is an FAQs document the content of which you may find helpful in communicating with staff and others as appropriate.

Yours faithfully,



**Gill Gittins
Assistant Employers' Secretary**

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q1. When did the NJC interim agreement end?

The Agreement was put in place to allow a period of one month during which it was hoped agreement could be reached with the FBU on an alternative to a particular control measure. The end date was identified in the agreement – 11th January 2021:

‘This interim agreement will operate for up to one month (until Monday 11th January 2021) and will ensure that the additional work activities will continue to remain available to those FRA/FRSs who utilise this agreement.’

‘This will allow time for a review of testing arrangements and/or the availability of vaccination for Grey Book personnel to take place with a view to identifying an alternative approach to the non-attendance at a fire service premises for 3 days pending a test and a negative result in that test, which currently relates to a risk assessment control measure for ambulance driving/working as part of an ambulance crew activities, those activities delivered within care homes, face fitting where the activity takes place in a care home or hospital and handling of dead bodies. Should the review successfully conclude, or vaccination for Grey Book personnel become available, sooner than 11th January the alternative approach will take effect at that time.’

Q2. Is it true the employers walked away from the NJC agreement?

Absolutely not. As set out within the agreement itself, the agreement came to an end on 11th January. Despite best endeavours and intense joint discussion, it was simply not possible to achieve the aim of the review. Therefore, it no longer existed to walk away from.

Q3. Why not just carry on talking?

We did. But we couldn't do so indefinitely. The COVID pandemic is at its height and it is imperative that we offer as much support as possible to partner organisations such as the NHS and ambulance services as well as members of our communities. We wanted to do so on a national basis so held off on any announcement while we continued to discuss the possibility of a national agreement. But with rapidly increasing calls for help it was impossible to maintain that position past the evening of 13th January. The National Employers are open to joint discussion going forward.

Q4. Are the National Employers still open to talks?

Yes, it remains open to talks. But in the absence of a national agreement we had to recognise that given the urgency of the requests for support including with mass community testing and mass community vaccination, local fire and rescue authorities and services need to be able to respond to such requests now.

Q5. The FBU say the National Employers did not make them aware of its position, is that true?

Following intense negotiation in the month up to 11th January (the end of the agreement), the National Employers continued to engage in joint discussion with the clear intention of being able to secure an agreed way forward.

Even after the agreement expired, the employers continued to engage with the FBU to see if an agreed way forward could be identified building upon the first draft of an agreement the employers had provided on 7th January. It was made clear on the 12th

January that amendments incorporated after the FBU detailed response on the evening of 11th, represented the employers' final position. Given the interim agreement had ended, an urgent response was sought. The employers were clear that it would need to communicate with FRAs and FRSs advising them of the outcome one way or the other by 5.00p.m. on 13th January.

Q6. You talk about the importance of vaccinating members of the community, what about firefighters?

The new 'Parity of Health Surveillance' approach would also extend to vaccination should that become a pre-requisite for the activity as FRS staff will be afforded the same level of protection and health surveillance as the partner agency staff. This will include vaccination when driving ambulances or when working at a vaccination centre. This has not been confirmed for any other activity at present. However, the reference to parity future proofs the Risk Assessment should the situation change – this was an intentional inclusion within the document. We will also continue to support priority vaccination for firefighters as an occupational group.

Q7. What does 'Parity of Health Surveillance' mean?

All FRS volunteers must be afforded the same health surveillance (testing) arrangements as the partner agency employees/volunteers they are working with in respect of the activity undertaken. If not provided, the activity should not be undertaken. The Risk Assessment for the specific activity sets out the current arrangements that should be secured prior to commencement of the activity. The health surveillance arrangements for the specific activity would also continue for a period of 10 days on return to the FRS workplace. For example, the Health Surveillance arrangements in place for the activity Ambulance Driving and Patient/Ambulance Personnel Support limited to current competence (not additional FRS First or Co Responding) as of the 1st of January 2021 are 2 Lateral Flow Tests per week. The health service comparator is Ambulance Technician/Paramedic (ACE). Personnel should be tested twice weekly every three to four days to fit with shift patterns and leave requirements.

Q8. What happens if parity isn't provided or insufficient tests are available?

The position is very clear, if parity isn't provided or insufficient tests are available at the outset, then the activity would not take place.

Q9. Where can I see the revised risk assessments for the affected activities?

The risk assessments can be found on the [NFCC website](#).

Q10. Why did the National Employers ask the NFCC to advise upon and develop the revised risk assessments on their behalf for the affected activities?

The National Employers asked the NFCC to advise upon and develop the revised risk assessments as the professionals best placed to develop appropriate best practice risk assessments, mindful of our responsibilities to employees in terms of health and safety. The NFCC had the relevant individuals in place with qualifications and experience and the support of Chief Fire Officers and specialist employer advisers across the UK. Consultation also took place with all fire service trade unions. Any local variation to the best practice risk assessments would be made when reviewed through

the usual local health and safety process and the necessary production of specific local risk assessments.

Q11. What was wrong with the existing control measure?

Through the predecessor tripartite agreement between the National Employers, NFCC and FBU it was recommended that for some activities an FRS detach the employee whenever possible from other fire service duties for the duration of the assistance he/she provides which can be broadly described as:

- Forming a part of an ambulance crew;
- Working with dead bodies (mortuary assistance);
- Working in hospitals;
- Working in care homes.

Following the cessation of any detachment to perform such an activity an employee, as a condition of volunteering, would be put forward for a test to take place no sooner than 3 days following that cessation and not return to work until a negative result is received.

When that agreement ended and was replaced by an NJC agreement the provision carried over but in the context of reviewing this aspect 'with a view to identifying an alternative approach' and to do so by 11th January 2021.

The National Employers received advice from the NFCC and specialist employer advisers that the existing control measure and any variation on isolation is no longer necessary given the much-improved position around availability of testing since the original control measure was agreed many months ago. 10,000 Lateral flow tests per week have been secured by fire and rescue services to undertake this support work notwithstanding the access to tests secured through the requesting partner. There is a facility for employers of essential workers (including FRS staff) to directly refer employees for a PCR test but this is restricted to those employees self-isolating because they or members of their household have Coronavirus symptoms.

Q12. What is the position in respect of my pension?

You are volunteering to assist your service's response to the pandemic, thereby agreeing to undertake a variation to your normal duties following a reasonable request by your employer. You are therefore undertaking authorised duty within the context of your existing contract and the pension scheme rules.

Q13. Do I have to take part in the activities?

No, it remains the case that it is a matter for individual employees to decide whether or not they wish to volunteer. Given the exceptional pandemic situation, the employers are keen that sufficient employees do volunteer and that those already volunteering continue to do so.

Local Government Association,
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Employers' Secretary, Naomi Cooke

**FIRE & RESCUE SERVICES
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**To: Chief Fire Officers
Chief Executives/Clerks to Fire Authorities
Chairs of Fire Authorities
Directors of Human Resources**

CC: Members of the Employers' Side of the NJC

28th January 2021

CIRCULAR EMP/3/21

COVID Support

1. For information, please find attached a recent exchange of correspondence between Matt Wrack, General Secretary of the Fire Brigades Union and Cllr Chard, Chair of the National Employers.
2. Cllr Chard's response refers to both the original letter and sight of the FBU's circular issued to its members yesterday.

Yours faithfully,



**Gill Gittins
Assistant Employers' Secretary**



Matt Wrack General Secretary
Bradley House, 68 Coombe Road,
Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey KT2 7AE
fbu.org.uk | @fbunational
020 8541 1765 | office@fbu.org.uk

Our Ref: MW/sll

26 January 2021

Mr Nick Chard – National Joint Council Employers Side Chair

Letter sent by email to nick.chard@kent.gov.uk

Dear Nick

Discussions to seek a reinstatement of a national agreement for Covid-related assistance to partner agencies

I am writing to build on the positive discussion at yesterday's meeting of the NJC lead members. If there is to be an agreement it is imperative that the meetings to explore whether this is achievable take place as soon as possible.

The officials at FBU head office, and the Executive Council as the decision-making body, have agreed to continue to prioritise consideration of any proposals from the employers' side and/or that arising from the joint discussions.

We have expressed our disappointment at the termination of the national agreement but we are pleased that the employers wish to explore the reinstatement of an agreement. The ideal situation would be to have an agreement which could be reached without any delay.

This can be achieved by reinstating the control measures agreed and circulated on 9 December 2020, whilst any alternative arrangements are discussed.

If the employers are not willing to do so then the status quo, as a consequence of the national employers ending the agreement on 13 January, is that there is no agreement.

We would be content if, as previously, negotiators are fully empowered, to negotiate a draft agreement which would be brought to the union for approval. It would be advantageous for both sides to empower their representatives in this way.

The EC remains committed to:

- ensuring that assistance can be provided to other sectors to defeat this pandemic;
- ensuring good conditions of employment that provide for the safety and health of all staff.

Contd/2...

We note with pride that the arrangements in place under the national agreement ensured that assistance to other sectors was provided whilst the fire sector was largely kept safe.

ONS statistics, published 25 January 2021, on Coronavirus (COVID-19) related deaths by occupation in England and Wales show that up until now the number of COVID-19 related deaths in the FRS are lower than the fatality rates in many other settings and significantly lower than those in care and health settings:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/causesofdeath/bulletins/coronaviruscovid19relateddeathsbyoccupationenglandandwales/deathsregisteredbetween9marchand28december2020#men-and-deaths-involving-covid-19-by-occupation>

The impasse – between the two sides of the NJC is:

- The outsourcing of certain control measures and risk management decisions; the matter of the standard of control measures not being set by the FRS as a result of risk assessment, but proposing instead to track a standard set by external agencies by way of the provision of 'parity' only (and in relation to different hazards to those identified in the FRS).
- The absence of a provision to ensure safe and clear arrangements for the situation where no test (kit) is available at the point when the firefighter returns to the FRS workplace.

There is no doubt that if the employers had been prepared to shift their position to address these two fundamental and reasonable points, the FBU would have been able to reach agreement on the use of the lateral flow test (LFTs) as an alternative to the PCR test after a minimum of three days.

However, since 13 January some other concerns, raised by a number of leading health and scientific experts, regarding the efficacy of LFTs and the manner in which they are being used have come to our attention which we mentioned at our meeting on 25 January.

We propose that these matters inform our discussions. It is vital that we adopt the safest possible practice especially in the light of the new variants which are considered more transmissible and more infectious than the original Covid strain. This would be in line with the position published in the paper by the Westminster government's scientific advisory committee (SAGE) on 31 December - Mitigations to Reduce Transmission of the new variant SARS-CoV-2 virus.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/emqspi-btweg-mitigations-to-reduce-transmission-of-the-new-variant-sars-cov-2-virus-22-december-2020>

This explained that a new variant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (VOC-202012/01, variant B.1.1.7 - 'new variant') had been identified in the UK and was spreading rapidly. SAGE estimated that this new variant could be associated with an R number of 0.39 higher than other lineages and a growth rate that could be 71% faster per generation than other variants.

SAGE argued that it was now *“essential to reinforce the core principles of a hierarchy of control measures to reduce physical transmission through the environment by all routes – close-range, airborne, and via surfaces, given the risks that transmission of the new variant may be higher for all these routes”*.

Contd/3...

SAGE stated that the primary actions to reduce transmission included reducing social contacts, effective testing and tracing, robust outbreak identification and control, support to ensure effective isolation and quarantine, and population vaccination. They warned that “as a consequence of the uncertainty around the mechanisms for increased transmission, enhanced mitigation measures are likely to be necessary”. The warning included the following:

6. *Where interactions between people are unavoidable, then engineering, procedural and personal controls are essential for reducing transmission. It is important that these measures are applied rigorously to ensure they are effective. Organisations and individuals should reassess their environments in the light of new evidence about transmissibility of the new variant to consider whether they have maximised all the steps they can take to reduce the probability of transmission.*

I look forward to hearing from you shortly.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. Wrack". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Matt Wrack
General Secretary

cc: Gill Gittins
Naomi Cooke

Local Government Association,
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Employers' Secretary, Naomi Cooke

FIRE & RESCUE SERVICES National Employers

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Matt Wrack
General Secretary
Fire Brigades Union
Bradley House
68 Coombe Rd
Kingston upon Thames
Surrey, KT2 7AE

28th January 2020

BY EMAIL ONLY

Dear Matt,

I refer to your letter dated 26 January 2021.

Lead members were content to discuss the matter of COVID support arrangements as part of the pre-arranged NJC joint lead members meeting on 25th. You will recall members explained that they would now need to explore with the full membership of the employers' side of the NJC the potential for a replacement agreement to that which expired at midnight on 11th January.

In respect of the impasse referred to in your letter you will not be surprised that I believe it reasonable to express the employers' view.

In the case of the parity issue, the employers' had suggested that in the event of an indication of a reduction in the health surveillance arrangements (which would be set out in the respective risk assessment/s) a review could take place to consider whether the change still provided an appropriate control/s for fire and rescue service personnel undertaking the particular activity.

In the case of your second point – no test (kit) being available when the firefighter returns to the FRS workplace – the employers' response provided absolute clarity and reassurance. If sufficient tests were not available at the outset of the activity, then the activity would not happen.

Unfortunately, the FBU had not been prepared to shift its position.

I am also aware of the FBU circular issued on 27th January. While I don't believe it helpful to enter into tit for tat responses I do feel it important to say that we stand by the content of the FAQs issued to FRA/FRSs as an accurate reflection, including that the duration of the NJC agreement was clearly set out in the original agreement, and that prior to release of the employers' circular on 13th January the FBU was aware of

both the employers' final position in respect of an agreement and that it would need to advise FRAs one way or another by 5.00p.m. on 13th January whether or not a way forward had been agreed.

I can confirm that arrangements are currently being put in place for an employers' side meeting and I can confirm your letter will be included in its considerations.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nick Chard', is centered within a light gray rectangular box.

Cllr Nick Chard

Chair – NJC Employers' Side

County Durham and Darlington
Fire and Rescue Authority



Safest People, Safest Places

Combined Fire Authority

19 February 2021

Notes of the Finance Committee Meeting held on 3 February 2021

Report of the Chair of the Finance Committee

Members Present: Cllr A Batey in the Chair

Cllrs R Bell, J Shuttleworth, D Freeman, C Potts, Cllr H Crumbie

Purpose of the report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide members with an update on the discussions and recommendations.

Forecast Outturn 2020/21 Quarter 3

2. Members were presented with details of the service's forecast revenue and capital financial outturn position. The forecast revenue outturn position is an underspend of £0.290M based on income and expenditure to 31 December 2020.

The Committee **noted** the report.

Short term investments 2020/21 Quarter 3

3. Members were presented with information on the Service's short-term investments for the period ending 31 December 2020.

The Committee **noted** the report.

Revenue and Capital Budgets 2021/22 Budget and Medium-Term Financial Plan

4. Members were presented with details of the provisional local government finance settlement for 2021/22 to consider the revenue and capital budgets and medium-term financial plan (MTFP) and to agree a firm recommendation to the meeting of the Fire Authority on 19 February 2021.

The committee discussed possible effects of a council tax increase.

- (i) The committee **considered** the information in the report.
- (ii) The committee **considered** the level of council tax for the 2021/22 financial year.
- (iii) The committee **noted** the risks that had been identified as part of the budget setting process
- (iv) The committee **agreed** that a firm recommendation be made to the Combined Fire Authority meeting on 19 February 2021 that council tax for 2021/22 be increased by 1.96%.

County Durham and Darlington
Fire and Rescue Authority



Safest People, Safest Places

Combined Fire Authority

19 February 2021

Budget 2021/22 Report Under Section 25 of Local Government Act 2003

Report of the Treasurer

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide members with information on the robustness of the estimates and the adequacy of reserves, so that Members have authoritative advice available when they make their budget decisions.

Background

2. Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRA's) decide each year how much they are going to raise from council tax. They base their decision on a budget that sets out estimates of what they plan to spend on the Service.
3. The decision on the level of the council tax is taken before the year begins and it cannot be changed during the year, so allowance for risks and uncertainties that might increase service expenditure above that planned, must be made by:
 - a) making prudent allowance in the estimates for each of the services, and
 - b) ensuring that there are adequate reserves to draw on if the Service estimates turn out to be sufficient.
4. Section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003 requires that an Authority's Chief Financial Officer reports to the Authority when it is considering its budget and council tax. The report must deal with the robustness of the estimates and the adequacy of the reserves allowed for in the budget proposals, so that members will have authoritative advice available to them when they make their decisions.

Section 25 also requires Members to have regard to the report in making their decisions.

Robustness of Estimates

5. The budget process has involved Members and staff in a thorough examination of the budget now recommended to the Authority.
6. During the budget process risks have also been identified. It is anticipated that these risks can be managed using contingencies and if necessary, reserves.
7. The budget has been the subject of extensive consultation and challenge. Community representatives and the representatives of the National Non-Domestic Rate Payers have had the opportunity to comment on the budget and the proposals.
8. In my view, the robustness of the estimates has been ensured by the budget process, which has enabled all practical steps to be taken to identify and make provision for the Authority's commitments in 2021/22.
9. It should be noted that plans for 2022/23, 2023/24 and 2024/25 are based on a range of assumptions and estimates for these years are therefore less robust at this stage.

Adequacy of Reserves

10. The CIPFA Local Authority Accounting Panel (LAAP) has issued a guidance note on Local Authority Reserves and Balances (LAAP Bulletin 55) to assist local authorities in this process. This guidance is not statutory, but compliance is recommended in CIPFA's 2003 Statement on the Role of the Finance Director in Local Government. It would be best practice to follow this guidance.
11. The guidance however, states that no case has yet been made to set a statutory minimum level of reserves, either as an absolute amount or a percentage of the budget. Each local authority should take advice from its Chief Financial Officer and base its judgement on local circumstances.
12. The Fire and Rescue National Framework for England document makes specific reference to reserves and requires (FRA's) to provide information to enable understanding of the purpose for which each reserve is held and how holding each reserve supports the FRA's medium-term financial plan (MTFP). In addition, authorities are required to provide justification for holding a general reserve larger than 5% of budget.
13. A general reserve of 5% of budget is considered adequate taking account of the risks associated with the MTFP and the Authority's track record of delivering efficiency savings and sound budget management.
14. The reserves policy is that the Authority will:
 - Set aside sufficient sums in earmarked reserves as it considers prudent to do so. The Treasurer will be authorised to establish such reserves as required and to review them for adequacy and purpose on a regular basis.
 - Aim to maintain a general reserve of 5% of net expenditure, currently £1.45m.
15. In coming to a view on the adequacy of reserves, account needs to be taken of the risks facing the Authority. The Annual Governance Statement, within the Authority's Statement of Accounts, gives assurance in relation to the organisation's arrangements for the management of risk and ensuring proper arrangements are in place for governing its affairs and looking after the resources at its disposal.

16. The risk management process has identified a number of key risks which could impact on the Authority's resources. These risks which are outlined in the Authority's MTFP are likely to impact in the short to medium term.
17. The setting of the level of reserves is an important decision, not only in the budget for 2021/22 but also in the formulation of the MTFP.
18. In my view, if the Authority were to accept the Finance Committee's recommendations regarding the 2021/22 revenue budget, the level of council tax and capital expenditure, then the level of risks identified in the budget process, alongside the Authority's financial management arrangements, suggest that the level of reserves is adequate.

Recommendation

19. Members are **recommended** to:
 - a) **note** the Treasurer's assessment of the robustness of estimates and adequacy of reserves: and
 - b) **have regard** to this report when approving the budget and the level of council tax for 2021/22.

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Safest People, Safest Places

County Durham and Darlington
Fire and Rescue Authority



Combined Fire Authority

19 February 2021

2021/22 Revenue Budget and Council Tax, Capital Programme and Medium-Term Financial Plan

Report of Treasurer and Chief Fire Officer

PURPOSE AND STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

- 1 The purpose of the report is to enable the Authority to:
 - approve a revised revenue budget for 2020/21
 - approve a revenue budget for 2021/22
 - approve the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP)
 - approve the capital budgets for 2021/22 to 2024/25
 - determine the Fire Authority Council Tax Requirement
 - approve the associated resolutions

- 2 The report is divided into 11 sections:
 - Section A - Background (page 2)
 - Section B - Consultation (page 3)
 - Section C - Local Government Finance Settlement (page 4)
 - Section D – Reserves Strategy (page 5)
 - Section E – Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) (page 9)
 - Section F – Revenue Budget (page 16)
 - Section G - Capital Strategy (page 17)
 - Section H- Fire Authority Council Tax Requirement (page 22)
 - Section I - Prudential Code (page 25)
 - Section J - Treasury Management (page 31)
 - Section K - Summary of Recommendations (page 45)

SECTION A

BACKGROUND

- 1 A meeting of the Finance Committee was held on 03 February 2021 to consider the revenue and capital budgets, together with the MTFP. This report incorporates the recommendations of the Committee regarding the overall budget amount and the level of council tax for 2021/22.

SECTION B

CONSULTATION

- 1 The Authority has undertaken on-going consultation with a wide range of stakeholders on the Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) plan and the budget. The consultation process involved a wide range of stakeholders including:
 - Our staff
 - Representative Bodies
 - The public
 - Our partner agencies
 - Local councillors
 - Parish councils
 - Residents associations
 - Area Action Partnerships
 - Community groups
 - Representatives of the Non-Domestic Ratepayers.

- 2 Various methods of communication have been used in the consultation process and these included:
 - An on-line survey
 - Durham County Council and Darlington Borough Council staff
 - Messages about the survey and links to it from Twitter and Facebook via the Service accounts as well as the partner organisations (listed above)
 - Direct emailing to stakeholders (incl. Voluntary Sector, Businesses, Faith Groups)
 - Online events with the public (eg Facebook live)
 - Presentations to various strategic groups of Darlington Borough Council and Durham County Council including Overview and Scrutiny Committees
 - Presentations at Resident Association meetings
 - Presentations at Parish and Town Council meetings
 - Presentations to Area Action Partnership meetings
 - Briefings to all CDDFRS staff. Information also included in several staff bulletins and Communications Forums

- 3 Consultation on the budget and proposals for achieving efficiency savings have taken place with staff and the representative bodies on a regular basis. Meetings have been productive and focused on considering savings options that minimise any increase in risks in local communities.

- 4 It is **recommended** that members take into account the views of those consulted as they consider the budget and MTFP proposals.

SECTION C

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FINANCE SETTLEMENT

Settlement Funding Assessment

- 1 Due to the financial impact of COVID-19 the government has once again issued a one-year funding settlement for 2021/22, compounding the uncertainty surrounding future funding.
- 2 The settlement funding assessment has been calculated by formula and is the Government's assessment of the financial resources to be provided from a combination of revenue support grant, local business rates income and top-up grant. Table 1 below sets out the settlement figures for 2021/22 and the current year (2020/21).

Table 1: Settlement Funding Assessment

Description	2020/21 £m	2021/22 £m
Total Government Funding	9.171	9.190
Local Non-Domestic Rates	1.503	1.503
Total	10.674	10.693
Change in Funding	+0.241	+0.019
% Change in Funding	+2.3%	+0.2%

- 3 The Authority's funding from central government and local non-domestic rates will increase by £0.019M (0.2%) in 2021/22. We are unlikely to have longer term certainty around funding until the end of 2021.

Local Council Tax Referendum

- 4 The Government has also announced details of the local council tax referendum limits for 2021/22.
- 5 Any fire authority that wishes to increase council tax in 2021/22 by 2% or more, as compared to the 2020/21 council tax level will be required to hold a referendum.

Recommendation

- 6 It is **recommended** that the Authority notes the 2021/22 settlement funding assessment and the uncertainty around the funding position from 2022/23 onwards.

SECTION D

RESERVES STRATEGY

Background

- 1 The Fire and Rescue National Framework for England sets out the priorities and objectives for fire and rescue authorities (FRA's) and makes specific reference to reserves. The document requires FRA's to provide information to enable understanding of the purpose for which each reserve is held and how holding each reserve supports the FRA's MTFP.
- 2 The information which FRA's are required to publish includes:
 - How the level of the general reserve has been set
 - Justification for holding a general reserve larger than 5% of budget
 - Details of the activities or items to be funded from each earmarked reserve and how they support the FRA's strategy to deliver a good quality service to the public. Where an earmarked reserve is intended to fund a number of projects or programmes (for example a change or transformation reserve), details of each programme or project to be funded should be set out.
- 3 The information on each reserve should make clear how much of the funding falls into the following three categories:
 - a. Funding for planned expenditure on projects and programmes over the period of the current MTFP.
 - b. Funding for specific projects and programmes beyond the current planning period.
 - c. As a general contingency or resource to meet other expenditure needs held in accordance with sound principles of good financial management (e.g. insurance).

Reserves Policy

- 4 The Authority's reserves are held as:
 - A working balance to help cushion the impact of uneven cash flows and avoid unnecessary temporary borrowing. This forms part of general reserves.

- A contingency to cushion the impact of unexpected events or emergencies. This also forms part of general reserves.
- A means of building up funds, often referred to as earmarked reserves, to meet known or predicted liabilities.

5 The current reserves policy is that the Authority will:

- Set aside sufficient sums in earmarked reserves as it considers prudent to do so.
- Aim to maintain a general reserve of 5% of the net expenditure, currently £1.45m.

Estimated Reserves Position

6 The estimated reserves position for the period 2020/21 to 2024/25 is set out in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Estimated Reserves Position 2020/21 – 2024/25

Reserve	2020/21 £m	2021/22 £m	2022/23 £m	2023/24 £m	2024/25 £m
General Reserve	1.459	1.459	1.459	1.459	1.459
Earmarked Reserves	4.473	4.317	3.505	3.505	3.505
TOTAL RESERVES	5.932	5.776	4.964	4.964	4.964

General Reserve

- 7 The Authority has a robust approach to managing risk and there are effective arrangements for financial control in place. However, given the high level of influence that third parties such as the Local Government Employers and government departments have on income and expenditure there is always a risk that the Authority will unexpectedly become liable for expenditure that it has not budgeted for. As a single purpose authority, the Authority has no opportunity to use cross service subsidies to meet unanticipated expenditure. Therefore, proportionally, its general reserve may be slightly higher than a multi-purpose authority.
- 8 The Authority has a policy to maintain the general reserve at 5% of the net expenditure which is a commonly used benchmark across the fire sector. A risk assessment of the adequacy of the Authority's general reserve is carried out at the year-end and any necessary adjustments are made as part of the final accounts process. A general reserve of 5% of net expenditure is considered to

be adequate taking account of the risks associated with the MTFP, the level of earmarked reserves and the Authority's track record of delivering efficiency savings and sound budget management.

Earmarked Reserves

- 9 The Authority holds the following earmarked reserves to meet known or predicted liabilities:

Pensions Reserve (General Contingency)

The purpose of the pensions reserve is to meet any unforeseen pension costs which may arise due to changes to pension schemes, or any increase in the level of ill-health retirements over and above the level included in the revenue budget. Each higher tier ill-health retirement can cost in the region of £125K therefore the pensions reserve equates to the equivalent of an additional 4 higher tier ill-health retirements over the four-year MTFP period.

Insurance Reserve (General Contingency)

The excess levels on the Authority's insurance policies are significant and the purpose of this reserve is to meet any unexpected increase in the level of claims excesses that may arise over and above the sums included in the revenue budget. Provision has not been made in the revenue budget to cover the payment of policy excesses which are £50K on the vehicle insurance policy and £100K on the public and employer's liability policies.

Resilience (General Contingency)

The National Framework requires the Authority to maintain national resilience capabilities in a high state of operational readiness. The funds in this reserve have been set aside to meet any unforeseen costs which may arise to meet this obligation and any costs associated with a business continuity event such as a prolonged period of industrial action or the need to support a significant operational incident over a prolonged period of time, either within our area or elsewhere.

Community Safety Reserve

This reserve is made up of the balance of unspent grant to enable specific community safety improvements to be undertaken. This balance is expected to be fully utilised during 2021/22.

New Risks Reserve

This reserve holds the balance of unspent grant, earmarked to fund the response to emerging new risks. This balance is expected to be fully utilised during 2021/22.

Modernisation Reserve (Funding for projects)

The funds in this reserve are earmarked to fund expenditure on future improvements to the Authority's estate.

Emergency Services Mobile Communications Programme (Grant funding for a planned project)

The reserve comprises of the balance of unspent grant, earmarked to fund the replacement national mobile communications systems. Whilst the funds in this reserve are not legally or contractually committed at this stage, they will be fully utilised over the MTFP period to finance the replacement systems.

- 10 The estimated movement on each of the earmarked reserves during the period 2021/21 to 2024/25 is set out in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Earmarked Reserves 2021/21 to 2024/25

Earmarked Reserve	Estimated Balance at 01/04/21 £m	Transfers to Reserves £m	Use of Reserves £m	Estimated Balance 31/03/25 £m
Pensions	0.500	0	0	0.500
Insurance	0.250	0	0	0.250
Resilience	0.625	0	0	0.625
Modernisation	2.130	0	0	2.130
ESMCP	0.812	0	-0.812	0
Community Safety	0.110	0	-0.110	0
New Risks	0.046	0	-0.046	0
TOTAL	4.473	0	-0.968	3.505

Recommendations

- 11 It is **recommended** that the Authority:

(a) Agrees to the policy for reserves, that the Authority will:

- Set aside sufficient sums in earmarked reserves as it considers prudent to do so.
- Aim to maintain a general reserve of 5% of the net expenditure, currently £1.45m.

SECTION E

MEDIUM-TERM FINANCIAL PLAN

This section provides a summary of the MTFP for 2021/22 to 2024/25.

Basis of the Preparation of the Medium-Term Financial Plan

- 1 The MTFP has been revised to take account of the settlement information and to incorporate 2021/22 and future year's expenditure and income estimates.

Resources

Settlement Funding

- 2 Details of the Local Government Finance Settlement are outlined in Section C. The Government has only provided a one-year settlement and funding has increased by £0.019m (0.2%) in 2021/22. The funding position beyond 2021/22 is currently unknown and we are unlikely to have longer term certainty regarding the level of funding until late 2021.

Council Tax

- 3 The MTFP has been calculated based on the assumption that council tax will increase by 1.96% in 2021/22 and by 2% in each of the financial years included in the MTFP thereafter. Members will need to review these assumptions noting that each 1% change in council tax results in a variation of approximately £185,000.

Council Tax and Business Rates Collection Fund

- 4 The impact of COVID-19 on council tax and business rates receipts in 2020/21 has been significant. The Spending Review 2020 confirmed that the government will compensate local authorities for 75% of irrecoverable losses in council tax and business rates income in respect of 2020/21.
- 5 Under normal circumstances any deficit on the collection fund would need to be built into the budget for the following year however, the government have announced that the deficit for 2020/21 (after allowing for the 75% compensation) should be spread over the following 3 years 2021/22, 2022/23 and 2023/24.
- 6 After allowing for the 75% government support, the Authority has a forecast deficit on the collection fund for 2020/21 of £0.356M.

Budget Pressures

- 7 A number of budget pressures have been identified which have been incorporated into the MTFP:

Pay Awards

- 8 The Spending Review 2020 set out the government's plans to introduce a freeze on public sector pay in 2021/22 with the exception of employees earning below £24,000 who will receive a minimum £250 increase. The pay budget for 2021/22 has been compiled on this basis. From 2022/23 onwards the MTFP includes a pay award of 2% per annum. Each additional 1% increase in pay for the whole workforce costs in the region of £230,000. Any unfunded pay increase above the level included in the MTFP would therefore have a significant impact on the forecast deficit.

Firefighters Pension Scheme (FPS)

- 9 Following the last valuation of the Firefighters' Pension Scheme there was an average increase of 12.6% in the employer's contribution rate which resulted in an increase of £1.560m in the overall cost. The Government have made grant funding available towards the additional cost in 2020/21 and we have been informed that this funding will continue in 2021/22. From 2022/23 onwards we expect this funding to be mainstreamed into the settlement funding assessment although this has not been confirmed at this stage.

COVID-19

- 10 The Authority received government grant of £599,000 in 2020/21 to deal with the impact of COVID-19. The government have stated that looking to the future, they are optimistic about overcoming the spread of the virus and on that basis, their working assumption is that COVID-19 costs will start to decline significantly from Easter onwards. Whilst they have committed to keeping the situation under review, authorities have been told to plan on the basis of no further funding to meet COVID-19 costs in 2021-22. Should the Authority continue to incur expenditure related to COVID-19 it may be necessary to use reserves as no provision has been made in the MTFP for this additional cost.

Savings Options

- 11 At the Fire Authority strategic planning day on 07 October 2020, members received an update on the available options that have been modelled to shape the Service's Emergency Response provision in future years together with alternative options for savings. A summary of the savings options is set out in Table 4 below:

Table 4: Summary of Savings Options

	Option	Saving £m	Response Standards Impact
1	Ride with a crew of 4 on all appliances	0.749	Least
2	SRU Unit Crewed	0.208	Least
3	Remove 1 x station TRV	0.208	Least
4	Phase 2 of the Service Restructure	0.130	None
5	Review of SLT and Middle Managers	0.445	None
6	Service Headquarters	0.200	None
7	2 x stations to day crewing	1.023	Greater
8	2 x stations 2 nd pump to day crewing	0.695	Greater
9	2 x stations 1 pump and 1 TRV	1.381	Greater
10	2 x stations to RDS only	1.398	Greatest
11	2 x stations removal of 2 nd pump	1.913	Greatest

- 12 At this stage, none of the above options have been incorporated into the budget for 2021/22 or any of the MTFP models set out below.

Medium Term Financial Plan Assumptions

- 13 As there is a great deal of uncertainty surrounding the level of Government funding from 2021/22 onwards, three MTFP scenarios have been modelled based on differing levels of funding. All three models include a £0.019m increase in settlement funding in 2021/22 and are based upon the assumptions set out in Table 5 below:

Table 5: MTFP Assumptions

	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Income Assumptions				
Council Tax Base	0	+0.50%	+0.50%	+0.50%
Council Tax Level	+1.96%	+2.00%	+2.00%	+2.00%
Expenditure Assumptions				
Pay Awards	0%*	+2.00%	+2.00%	+2.00%
Inflation	+1.00%	+2.00%	+2.00%	+2.00%

*With the exception of individuals earning below £24,000 who will receive £250.

Medium Term Financial Plan Models

14 The following MTFP models are based on the assumptions outlined above and incorporate 2021/22 and future year's expenditure and income estimates:

- Model 1 (Table 6) – “Best Case Scenario” – based upon a 2% increase in settlement funding from 2022/23 onwards.
- Model 2 “Mid Case Scenario” (Table 7) – based upon no further increase in settlement funding from 2022/23 onwards.
- Model 3 “Worse Case Scenario” (Table 8) – based upon a 5% reduction in settlement funding from 2022/23 onwards.

Table 6: Medium Term Financial Plan – Model 1 ‘Best Case Scenario’

	2021/22 £m	2022/23 £m	2023/24 £m	2024/25 £m
Net Expenditure	29.338	30.598	31.492	32.418
Total Government Funding	9.190	9.373	9.560	9.751
Local Non-Domestic Rates	1.432	1.432	1.432	1.432
Council Tax	18.832	19.290	19.775	20.271
Deficit on Collection Fund	(0.116)	(0.123)	(0.123)	0
Total Funding	29.338	29.972	30.644	31.454
Surplus/ (Shortfall)	0	(0.626)	(0.848)	(0.964)

15 The MTFP in Table 6 above shows a balanced budget position in 2020/21 and a shortfall in funding of £0.626m in 2022/23 rising to £0.964m in 2024/25.

Table 7: Medium Term Financial Plan – Model 1 ‘Mid Case Scenario’

	2021/22 £m	2022/23 £m	2023/24 £m	2024/25 £m
Net Expenditure	29.338	30.598	31.492	32.418
Total Government Funding	9.190	9.190	9.190	9.190
Local Non-Domestic Rates	1.432	1.432	1.432	1.432
Council Tax	18.832	19.290	19.775	20.271
Deficit on Collection Fund	(0.116)	(0.123)	(0.123)	0
Total Funding	29.338	29.789	30.274	30.893
Surplus/ (Shortfall)	0	(0.809)	(1.218)	(1.525)

- 16 The MTFP in Table 7 above shows a balanced budget position in 2021/22 and a shortfall in funding of £0.809m in 2022/23 rising to £1.525m in 2024/25.

Table 8: Medium Term Financial Plan – Model 3 ‘Worst Case Scenario’

	2021/22 £m	2022/23 £m	2023/24 £m	2024/25 £m
Net Expenditure	29.338	30.598	31.492	32.418
Total Government Funding	9.190	8.730	8.294	7.879
Local Non-Domestic Rates	1.432	1.432	1.432	1.432
Council Tax	18.832	19.290	19.775	20.271
Deficit on Collection Fund	(0.116)	(0.123)	(0.123)	0
Total Funding	29.338	29.329	29.378	29.582
Surplus/ (Shortfall)	0	(1.269)	(2.114)	(2.836)

- 17 The MTFP in Table 8 above shows a balanced budget position in 2021/22 and a shortfall in funding of £1.269m in 2022/23 rising to £2.836m in 2024/25.
- 18 It should be noted that the estimates for 2022/23 onwards are less robust as they are based upon a number of assumptions. Therefore, there is a risk that the actual position could turn out to be different. They do, however, provide a good indication of the level of savings which may need to be identified in future years in order to balance the budget.

Risks

- 19 The Authority has embedded risk management as part of its overall control framework and reviews financial risks on a regular basis. Risks have also been fully reviewed as part of the overall budget setting process for 2021/22 and over the medium term.
- 20 There are a number of risks associated with the MTFP that need to be considered as part of the budget setting process:
- (a) **Local Business Rates Retention**
The Local Business Rates Retention Scheme introduces risks in relation to the Authority being exposed to fluctuations in business rates income in County Durham and Darlington. The Authority is also exposed to collection rate risk and if collection rates fall, then there will be a direct impact on the Authority's available financial resources.
 - (b) **Local Council Tax Benefit Schemes**
The introduction of local council tax benefit schemes by Durham County Council and Darlington Borough Council exposes the Authority to a further council tax collection rate risk.
 - (c) **COVID-19**
No further government funding has been announced to meet costs associated with COVID-19. Should the Authority continue to incur expenditure on COVID-19 it may be necessary to use reserves as no provision has been made in the MTFP for this additional cost.
 - (d) **Expenditure and Income Assumptions**
A number of assumptions have been made in relation to settlement funding, pay, prices and pension costs across the MTFP period. Whilst the assumptions are considered to be reasonable at this stage, there is a risk that the actual position could turn out to be different.

The employer costs of pensions are extremely difficult to forecast with any certainty. The outcome of the valuation exercise for the Firefighters Pension Scheme resulted in an increase of 12.6% in the average employer's contribution rate. The government have stated that grant funding will continue to be made available towards the additional cost however there is a risk that the Authority does not receive sufficient funding from 2022/23 onwards if this funding is mainstreamed into the settlement.

Table 9 below sets out the potential impact of changes to these assumptions on the MTFP position:

Table 9: Impact of Changes to Expenditure and Income Assumptions

Impact of Changes to Expenditure Assumptions	Annual Impact £m
1% change in level of pay award	£0.230
1% change in level of Inflation	£0.070
1% change in level of council tax	£0.185
1% change in level of settlement funding	£0.092

- 21 The above risks will be closely monitored, and the Authority will be notified of any significant movement in the financial assumptions and projections that have been made within the MTFP.

Value for Money

- 22 The Authority's approach to identifying efficiency savings is based on the principle of providing value for money to local taxpayers. The savings that have been identified as part of the budget setting process are focused on reducing cost whilst at the same time minimising the impact on the level of risk in local communities.

Recommendations

- 23 It is **recommended** that the Authority:
- (a) Agrees the Medium-Term Financial Plan.
 - (b) Notes the Treasurer's comments on the robustness of the estimates, the adequacy of reserves and the risks in the budget, as set out in the separate report under Section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003.

SECTION F

REVENUE BUDGET

Introduction

- 1 This section sets out the revised revenue budget for 2020/21 and the revenue budget for 2021/22.

Revised Revenue Budget 2020/21

- 2 During the year, the revenue budget is monitored and reports outlining spending against budget are regularly considered by the Finance Committee. Estimates are revised as pressures and opportunities for savings are identified and virement is exercised in accordance with the financial regulations of the Authority. Details of the revised 2020/21 revenue budget are set out in Appendix A.
- 3 Based upon expenditure and income to 31st December 2020, net expenditure for 2020/21 is forecast to be within the approved budget.
- 4 In order to secure the financial position of the Authority going forward It is recommended that the Treasurer is authorised to make any proper accounting transactions that would be in the interests of the Authority in relation to the accounts for 2020/21.

Revenue Budget 2021/22

- 5 The revenue budget for 2021/22 includes provision for pay awards, inflation, capital financing and any known variations. Due to the current financial climate, attention has been focussed on the achievement of further efficiencies during the preparation of the budget.
- 6 The net revenue budget for 2021/22 totals £29,337,855. Details of the revenue budget are set out in Appendix A.

Recommendations

- 7 The following resolutions are **recommended** to the Authority:
 - (a) That the revised revenue budget for 2020/21 as set out in Appendix A be approved.
 - (b) That the Treasurer be authorised to make any proper accounting transactions that would be in the interests of the Authority in relation to the accounts for 2020/21.
 - (c) That the revenue budget for 2021/22 as set out in Appendix A be approved.

SECTION G

CAPITAL STRATEGY 2020/21 TO 2024/25

Background

- 1 The revised CIPFA Prudential Code for Capital Finance in Local Authorities, which was issued in December 2017, sets out key objectives to ensure capital programme decisions are affordable, prudent and sustainable. Under the revised guidance, the Authority is now required to produce a Capital Strategy, which must be considered and approved annually by Members.

Purpose and Principles

- 2 The principles of the Capital Strategy are:
 - To ensure capital resources are aligned with the corporate priorities of the Authority.
 - To maintain the Authority's assets and infrastructure.
 - To maintain an affordable rolling capital programme.
 - To only undertake Prudential Borrowing where there are sufficient monies to meet the full borrowing and running costs of capital expenditure.
- 3 These principles have been followed when developing the capital programme, within the framework of the MTFP.
- 4 It is essential that the Authority ensures that its assets are in good condition and that it delivers a good service through the best use of its assets. Where assets are identified as surplus to requirements, they will be disposed of appropriately and where possible, will generate a capital receipt. Such capital receipts contribute towards the costs of future asset investment and development.

Monitoring

- 5 The Authority will undertake frequent monitoring of the agreed capital programme, including the funding of this programme. All expenditure incurred in delivering the capital programme must be compliant with the defined finance and procurement policies and procedures.

Funding

- 6 There are a number of available options for the financing of capital expenditure. Typically, this will be financed through a combination of revenue contributions or use of reserves, capital grants, capital receipts and borrowing, as defined below:
- Revenue Contributions – the revenue budget can include an amount allocated to support the funding of the capital programme.
 - Use of Reserves – revenue resources held in the Authority's modernisation reserve are set aside in order to fund capital expenditure.
 - Capital Grants – external grant funding may be available for some projects. Such funding must be applied for and utilised for the specific project. The Government have not announced any available capital grant funding for 2021/22.
 - Capital Receipts – cash receipts generated from the disposal of assets deemed to be surplus to requirements will be used to support new capital investment or to offset any future debt.
 - Borrowing – prudential borrowing can be used to fund capital expenditure. This is on condition that any borrowing is affordable, prudent and sustainable over the medium term. As part of the annual budget setting process, a range of calculations, known as prudential indicators, are completed in order to demonstrate this and ensure that when developing the MTFP, the cost of interest charges and the repayment of principal is taken into account.

Capital Receipts Strategy

- 7 Prior to the start of each financial year, under the statutory guidance issued by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), Local Authorities are required to publish a strategy on the planned use of capital receipts. Generally, capital receipts must only be utilised to support the purchase of capital expenditure. However, in March 2016, statutory guidance issued by the Government allowed a variation to this.
- 8 The Statutory Guidance on the Flexible Use of Capital Receipts allowed capital receipts to fund revenue expenditure costs which would generate ongoing savings, relating to sharing back office services, service reform, collaboration and driving digital delivery. This permission was initially applied from 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2019, but it was subsequently confirmed in the Local Government Finance Settlement, issued in February 2018, that this would be extended by a further 3 years to April 2022. Any transformation revenue costs which will be

incurred by 31 March 2022 and funded from capital receipts received between 1 April 2016 and 31 March 2022 must be detailed in the strategy.

- 9 The utilisation of capital receipts to fund expenditure that would usually be funded from revenue resources prevents these receipts from being available for investment in capital. To date, the Authority has not made use of the option to fund any revenue reform costs from capital receipts and the MTFP does not include any such funding. Any changes to this plan in the future would be considered on an individual project basis and any expected savings or service transformation proposals would be reported to the Authority for their consideration. The Authority is not expected to receive a significant level of capital receipts in 2021/22, but any received will be used to fund capital expenditure, reducing the need to borrow.

Significant Capital Projects

- 10 The main capital projects included in the Authority's Capital Programme are outlined below:
- **Premises** – The capital programme includes provision for major building works at Darlington fire station, Sedgfield fire station and the Training Centre. In addition, it includes a budget for minor works in order to ensure that the condition of the Authority's property portfolio is maintained, and any improvements or enhancements are undertaken whenever it is necessary and appropriate.
 - **Vehicle Replacement** – a comprehensive plan is in place to replace the operational fleet of fire appliances and specialist vehicles, pool cars and response vehicles when they reach the end of economic life. This is reviewed on an ongoing basis to identify any changes in the number and types of vehicles required to facilitate operational capacity.
 - **Equipment Replacement** – Equipment and IT assets are replaced in line with a detailed plan, which is subject to regular review.
- 11 All capital projects are subject to an assessment of risk and outcomes, as well as identifying any savings and efficiencies that can be achieved. The Authority seeks to collaborate with other partner agencies wherever possible, in order to maximise efficiencies and improvements to service.

Capital Expenditure

- 12 The Prudential Code requires that all decisions made by the Authority in relation to capital expenditure, investments and borrowing are prudent and sustainable. Therefore, the Authority must consider arrangements for debt repayment, risk and the impact on overall fiscal sustainability. The Authority should make reasonable estimates of the anticipated capital expenditure throughout the period covered by the MTFP.
- 13 The estimates of capital expenditure, along with the proposed sources of finance are outlined in Table 10 below:

Table 10: Capital Budgets 2020/21 – 2024/25

	2020/21 Revised £000	2021/22 £000	2022/23 £000	2023/24 £000	2024/25 £000
Premises	4,050	1,000	250	250	250
IT	105	240	150	150	150
Equipment	220	513	109	438	737
Vehicles	850	436	1,036	1,223	632
TOTAL	5,235	2,189	1,545	2,061	1,769
Funded by:					
Capital contributions	0	120	0	0	0
External borrowing	5,235	2,069	1,545	2,061	1,769
TOTAL FUNDING	5,235	2,189	1,545	2,061	1,769

- 14 A significant amount of work has been undertaken to ensure that the capital budgets proposed for the medium term are reflective of the Authority's priorities and are affordable in terms of associated revenue expenditure. The revenue costs associated with the capital programme have been incorporated into the MTFP.

Capital Financing Requirement

- 15 Under the Prudential Code, it is necessary for the Authority to calculate its Capital Financing Requirement (CFR), which relates to all unfunded capital expenditure, not yet permanently financed through the revenue account. The Authority's Capital Financing Requirement is set out in Table 11 below:

Table 11: Capital Financing Requirement 2020/21 – 2021/22

	2020/21 £000	2021/22 £000
Opening CFR	8,178	13,033
Capital Expenditure	5,235	2,189
Sources of Finance:		
Revenue Contributions	0	-120
Transfers from Reserves	0	0
Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP)	-380	-389
Closing CFR	13,033	14,713

External Debt

- 16 All borrowing is undertaken from the Public Works Loan Board (PWLB). The Authority currently has no PWLB debt outstanding. The estimated borrowing requirement based upon the capital programme contained within the MTFP is set out in Table 12 below:

Table 12: Estimated Borrowing Requirement 2021/22 – 2024/25

2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
£000	£000	£000	£000
7,199	1,545	2,061	1,769

Knowledge and Skills

- 17 Capital and Treasury Management are managed by professionally qualified accountants, who also have significant experience within local government. External professional advice is procured where required and members receive appropriate training on a variety of financial subjects, provided by officers and external providers.

Recommendations

- 18 It is **recommended** that the Authority approves the revised capital budget for 2020/21 and the capital budgets for 2021/22 to 2024/25.

SECTION H

FIRE AUTHORITY COUNCIL TAX REQUIREMENT

Council Tax

- 1 Taking into account the information outlined in Sections F and G, the budget has been constructed to include the assumption that council tax will be increased by 1.96%.
- 2 This will increase basic council tax from the 2020/21 level of £105.48 to £107.55 in 2021/22.
- 3 Members are **requested** to determine the level of Council Tax for 2021/22.

Calculation of the Council Tax Requirement

- 4 The calculation of the council tax requirement takes the Authority's net expenditure and deducts contributions from Government in respect of revenue support grant and top up grant, together with the business rates income receivable from Durham County Council and Darlington Borough Council. Allowance also has to be made for the Authority's share of any surplus or deficit on Durham County Council and Darlington Borough Council Collection Funds.
- 5 Assuming net revenue expenditure of £29,337,855 the calculation is shown in Table 13 below:

Table 13: Calculation of the 2021/22 Council Tax Requirement

	£	£
Net Revenue Expenditure		29,337,855
Less:		
Revenue Support Grant	3,499,067	
Top Up Grant		
Business Rates Income	7,122,966	
Collection Fund Surplus / Deficit	-116,484	
		10,505,549
Council Tax Requirement		18,832,306

Council Tax Base

- 6 The 'council tax bases' of Durham County Council and Darlington Borough Council are used to calculate the proportion of the Fire Authority's total precept to be levied on each local authority. The tax base is the estimated full year equivalent number of chargeable 'Band D' dwellings with two or more liable adults in respect of which tax will be received. The 'council tax bases' for 2021/22 as notified to the Fire Authority are set out in Table 14 below:

Table 14: Council Tax Base and Precept 2021/22

Authority	Council Tax Base	Precept £
Durham County Council	141,623.20	15,231,575.16
Darlington Borough Council	33,479.60	3,600,730.98
Total	175,102.80	18,832,306.14

Calculation of Fire Authority's Basic Council Tax

- 7 The basic council tax for the Authority is calculated by dividing the council tax requirement by the aggregate of the tax bases as shown below:

$$\frac{\text{Council Tax Requirement}}{\text{Aggregate Council Tax Base}} = \text{Basic Council Tax (At Band D)}$$

$$\frac{18,832,306.14}{175,102.80} = \text{£}107.55$$

- 8 A Basic Council Tax of £107.55 represents a 1.96% increase from the 2020/21 level.

Precept Instalments

- 9 Following discussions with the Treasurers of the collecting authorities, the following dates for the payment of the precept in ten equal instalments have been agreed:

- (a) Durham County Council:

06 April 2021	02 September 2021
04 May 2021	04 October 2021
02 June 2021	02 November 2021
02 July 2021	03 December 2021
02 August 2021	05 January 2022

(b) Darlington Borough Council:

19 April 2021	14 October 2021
25 May 2021	18 November 2021
30 June 2021	23 December 2021
04 August 2021	01 February 2022
09 September 2021	08 March 2022

10 It is proposed that Durham County Council and Darlington Borough Council also use these payment dates for income from business rates.

Recommendations

11 Based on the net expenditure of £29,337,855 and a Band D Council Tax of £107.55 it is **recommended** that the Authority adopts the following resolutions:

That for the year ended 31 March 2022:

- i. the 'council tax base' for the whole of the Authority's area be 175,102.80.
- ii. there be no Authority expenses relating to a part only of the Authority's area.
- iii. the 'basic amount of council tax' be £18,832,306.14 and the amount of the council tax for each category of dwelling be as set out in Table 15 below:

Table 15: 2021/22 Council Tax by Valuation Band

Valuation Band	Proportion of 'Basic Amount'	Council Tax
		£
A	6/9	71.70
B	7/9	83.65
C	8/9	95.60
D	'basic amount'	107.55
E	11/9	131.45
F	13/9	155.35
G	15/9	179.25
H	18/9	215.10

- iv. the Net Expenditure be £29,337,855 and that, after taking into account revenue support grant of £3,499,067 business rates income of £1,431,840, top up grant of £5,691,126, and a deficit on the collection fund of £116,484, precepts totalling £18,832,306.14 be issued to Durham County Council and Darlington Borough Council.

SECTION I

PRUDENTIAL CODE

Background

- 1 The framework of the prudential capital finance system, which came into effect from 1 April 2004, is contained in the Local Government Act 2003. Under the Act, Government borrowing controls based on “credit approvals” were abolished with effect from 1 April 2004. The Authority is now free to borrow and take out leases without Government consent, provided these commitments can be afforded. The Prudential Code is designed to guide the Authority’s decision on what it can afford. The Local Authorities (Capital Finance and Accounting) (England) Regulations 2003 specifies the Prudential Code for Capital Finance in Local Authorities, issued by CIPFA, as the code of practice to which local authorities must have regard when setting and reviewing their affordable borrowing limit.
- 2 The key objectives of the Prudential Code are to ensure that within a clear framework the capital investment plans of the Authority are affordable, prudent and sustainable. A further key objective is to ensure that treasury management decisions are taken in accordance with good professional practice and in a manner that supports prudence, affordability and sustainability.
- 3 To demonstrate that the above objectives have been fulfilled, the Prudential Code sets out the indicators that must be used, and the factors that must be taken into account. The Code does not include limits; these are for the Authority to set.
- 4 Previously, credit approvals from Central Government set the limit of a local authority’s long-term borrowing and attracted Revenue Support Grant (RSG) towards the financing costs of loans (interest and repayment of principal). Under the new system, unless, exceptionally, a national limit is imposed, the Authority is free to make its own borrowing decisions according to what it can afford. Central Government support for borrowing through RSG continues to be given on the basis of a named amount of capital expenditure which borrowing will support. The Authority will take the totality of Central Government support into account in setting its prudential limits.

Prudential Indicators

- 5 The estimates of capital expenditure to be incurred for the current and future years are contained in Section G of this report and summarised in Table 16 below:

Table 16: Prudential Indicators – Capital Expenditure

2019/20 Actual £000	2020/21 Estimate £000	2021/22 Estimate £000	2022/23 Estimate £000	2023/24 Estimate £000
1,531	5,235	2,189	1,545	2,061

- 6 Estimates of the end of year Capital Financing Requirement for the Authority for the current and future years and the actual Capital Financing Requirement at 31 March 2020 are set out in Table 17 below:

Table 17: Prudential Indicators – Capital Financing Requirement

2019/20 Actual £000	2020/21 Estimate £000	2021/22 Estimate £000	2022/23 Estimate £000	2023/24 Estimate £000
8,178	12,929	14,479	15,450	16,727

- 7 The Capital Financing Requirement measures the Authority's underlying need to borrow for a capital purpose. In accordance with best professional practice, the Fire Authority does not associate borrowing with particular items or types of expenditure. The Authority has an Integrated Treasury Management Strategy and has adopted the CIPFA Code of Practice for Treasury Management in the Public Services. The Authority's Treasury Management Strategy and annual plan for 2021/22 is shown in Section J. The Fire Authority has, at any point in time, a number of cash flows both positive and negative, and manages its treasury position in terms of its borrowings and investments in accordance with its approved Treasury Management Strategy. In day-to-day cash management, no distinction can be made between revenue cash and capital cash. External borrowing arises as a consequence of all the financial transactions of the Authority and not simply those arising from capital spending. In contrast, the Capital Financing Requirement reflects the Authority's underlying need to borrow for a capital purpose.

- 8 CIPFA’s Prudential Code for Capital Finance includes the following as a key indicator of prudence:

“In order to ensure that over the medium-term net borrowing will only be for a capital purpose the local authority should ensure that net external borrowing does not, except in the short term, exceed the total of capital financing requirement in the preceding year plus the estimates of any additional capital financing requirement for the current and next two financial years.”

- 9 There are no difficulties envisaged for the current or future years in meeting this requirement. This view takes into account current commitments, existing plans, and the proposals contained in this budget report.
- 10 Estimates of the ratio of financing costs to net revenue stream for the current and future years, and the actual figures for 2019/20 are set out in Table 18 below:

Table 18: Prudential Indicators – Ratio of Financing Costs to Net Revenue Stream

2019/20 Actual %	2020/21 Estimate %	2021/22 Estimate %	2022/23 Estimate %	2023/24 Estimate %
0.9	1.3	1.4	2.1	2.9

Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) Statement

- 11 The Authority is required to pay off an element of the accumulated General Fund capital spend each year through a revenue charge (the Minimum Revenue Provision – MRP). CLG Regulations have been issued which require the full Authority to approve an MRP Statement in advance of each year. A variety of options have been provided to replace the existing Regulations, so long as there is a prudent provision. The Authority is recommended to approve the following MRP Statement:
- i. For capital expenditure incurred before 1 April 2008, or which in the future will be Supported Capital Expenditure, the MRP policy will be:
 - **Existing practice** - MRP will follow the existing practice outlined in former CLG Regulations (Option 2).
 - ii. From 1 April 2008 for all unsupported borrowing the MRP policy will be:
 - **Asset Life Method (Annuity)** - MRP will be based on the estimated life of the assets, in accordance with the proposed regulations (Option 3).

External Debt

- 12 In respect of external debt, the Authority has set Authorised Limits for its total external debt, gross of investments, for the current (2020/21) and the next three financial years. These limits separately identify borrowing from other long-term liabilities such as finance leases. The authorised limits are set out in Table 19 below:

Table 19: Prudential Indicators – Authorised Limit for External Debt

	2020/21 Estimate £m	2021/22 Estimate £m	2022/23 Estimate £m	2023/24 Estimate £m
Borrowing	5.759	7.919	9.619	11.727
Long-term liabilities	7.657	7.408	7.147	6.858
Total	13.416	15.327	16.766	18.585

- 13 The Authorised Limits are consistent with the Authority's current commitments, existing plans and the proposals in this budget report for capital expenditure and financing, and with its approved treasury management policy statement and practices. They are based on the estimate of most likely, prudent but not worst-case scenario, with the addition of sufficient headroom over and above this to allow for operational management. An assessment of risk has been taken into account, as have plans for capital expenditure, estimates of the Capital Financing Requirement and estimates of cash flow requirements.
- 14 The Operational Boundary for external debt is based on the same estimates as the Authorised Limit but reflects directly the Treasurer's estimate of the most likely, prudent but not worst-case scenario, without the additional headroom included within the Authorised Limit. The Operational Boundary represents a key management tool for in year monitoring by the Treasurer. Within the Operational Boundary, figures for borrowing and other long-term liabilities are separately identified. The operational boundary limits are set out in Table 20 below:

Table 20: Prudential Indicators – Operational Boundary for External Debt

	2020/21 Estimate £m	2021/22 Estimate £m	2022/23 Estimate £m	2023/24 Estimate £m
Borrowing	5.235	7.199	8.744	10.661
Long-term liabilities	6.961	6.735	6.497	6.234
Total	12.196	13.934	15.242	16.895

- 15 The Authority's actual external debt at 31 March 2020 was £6.735m, comprising of long-term liabilities in respect of Private Finance Initiative (PFI) schemes. It should be noted that actual external borrowing differs from the Authorised Limit and Operational Boundary, since actual external debt reflects the position at one point in time.

Council Tax

- 16 The Prudential Indicators have been calculated using a 1.96% Council Tax increase in 2021/22 and assuming a 2% increase in subsequent years.
- 17 The capital programme outlined in Appendix C is funded by a mix of capital grants, contributions from revenue and borrowing under the Prudential Code.
- 18 The estimate of the incremental impact of this prudential borrowing for Band D Council Tax is set out in Table 21 below:

Table 21: Prudential Indicators – Incremental Impact of Borrowing

2021/22 %	2022/23 %	2023/24 %
0.52	0.61	0.88

Recommendations

- 19 It is **recommended** that the Authority:
- (a) Notes the prudential indicators.
 - (b) Approves the MRP Statement.
 - (c) Approves the following limits for external debt in 2021/22:
 - i. Authorised Limit of £15.327m
 - ii. Operational Boundary of £13.934m

SECTION J

TREASURY MANAGEMENT 2021/22

- 1 The CIPFA Code of Practice for Treasury Management in the Public Services makes the following key recommendations:
 - (i) Public service organisations should put in place formal and comprehensive objectives, policies and practices, strategies and reporting arrangements for the effective management and control of their treasury management activities
 - (ii) Their policies and practices should make clear that the effective management and control of risk are prime objectives of their treasury management activities
 - (iii) They should acknowledge that the pursuit of best value in treasury management and the use of suitable performance measures are valid and important tools for responsible organisations to employ in support of their business and service objectives; and that within the context of effective risk management, their treasury management policies and practices should reflect this.

- 2 The Authority has formally adopted the key recommendations of the CIPFA Code of Practice for Treasury Management in the Public Services and has created and maintains, as the cornerstone for effective treasury management:
 - a treasury management policy statement stating the policies and objectives of its treasury management activities. This is attached as Annex J1.
 - suitable treasury management practices (TMPs), setting out the manner in which the Authority will seek to achieve those policies and objectives, and prescribing how it will manage and control those activities. These are attached as Annex J2.

- 3 Reports will be presented to members of the Authority on its Treasury Management policies, practices and activities, including an annual strategy and plan in advance of the year, and an annual report after its close, in the form prescribed in the TMPs. The annual strategy for 2020/21 is shown in Annex J3. In implementing this strategy, the Authority will give priority to security and liquidity rather than yield. However, the Authority will aim to achieve the highest rate of interest consistent with proper levels of security and liquidity. In particular, members' attention is drawn to the key objectives of the Investment Strategy,

which is firstly safeguarding the repayment of principal and interest of its investments on time and secondly ensuring adequate liquidity. The investment return is the third objective. The Authority delegates responsibility for the execution and administration of treasury management decisions to the Treasurer, who will act in accordance with the Policy Statement, Treasury Management Practices and CIPFA's Standard of Professional Practice on Treasury Management.

Treasury Management Indicators

- 4 The Authority has set an upper limit on its *fixed* interest rate exposures for 2021/22, 2022/23 and 2023/24 of 100% of its net outstanding principal sum.
- 5 The Authority has further set an upper limit on its *variable* interest rate exposures for 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23 of 30% of its net outstanding principal sums.
- 6 The Authority's upper and lower limits for the maturity structure of its borrowings are set out in Table 22 below. The table shows the amount of projected borrowing that is fixed rate maturing in each period as a percentage of total borrowing that is fixed rate:

Table 22: Maturity Structure of Borrowings

	Upper Limit %	Lower Limit %
Under 12 months	20	0
12 months and within 24 months	20	0
24 months and within 5 years	30	0
5 years and within 10 years	50	0
10 years and above	100	0

- 7 The Authority does not intend to invest sums for periods longer than 364 days. This is seen as prudent interest rate risk management.

Recommendations

- 8 It is **recommended** that the Authority:
 - a) Continues to adopt the key recommendations of the CIPFA code.
 - b) Notes the Annual Treasury Management Strategy as set out in Annex J3.
 - c) Sets an upper limit on the Authority's fixed interest rate exposures for 2021/22, 2022/23 and 2023/24 of 100% of its net outstanding principal sum.

- d) Sets an upper limit on the Authority's variable interest rate exposures for 2021/22, 2022/23 and 2023/24 of 30% of its net outstanding principal sums.

Annex J1: Treasury Management Policy Statement

- 1 The Authority defines its treasury management activities as:

“The management of the organisation’s cash flows, its banking, money market and capital market transactions; the effective control of the risks associated with those activities; and the pursuit of optimum performance consistent with those risks”.

- 2 The Authority regards the successful identification, monitoring and control of risk to be the prime criteria by which the effectiveness of its treasury management activities will be measured. Accordingly, the analysis and reporting of treasury management activities will focus on their risk implications for the organisation.
- 3 The Authority acknowledges that effective treasury management will provide support towards the achievement of its business and Service objectives. It is therefore committed to the principles of achieving best value in treasury management, and to employing suitable performance measurement techniques, within the context of effective risk management.

Annex J2: Treasury Management Practices

1 TMP1 - TREASURY RISK MANAGEMENT

1.1 The Treasurer shall:

- Design, implement and monitor all arrangements for the identification, management and control of the treasury management risks shown below
- Report at least annually on the adequacy/ suitability thereof, and
- Report, as a matter of urgency, the circumstances of any actual or likely difficulty in achieving the Authority's objectives in this respect, all in accordance with the procedures set out in **TMP6 Reporting requirements and management information arrangements**.

1.2 *Liquidity*

The Authority will ensure it has adequate, but not excessive, cash resources, borrowing arrangements, overdraft or standby facilities, to enable the Authority at all times to have the level of funds available which are necessary for the achievement of its service objectives.

1.3 *Interest Rates*

The Authority will manage its exposure to fluctuations in interest rates with a view to containment of its net interest costs, or securing its interest revenues, in accordance with the amounts provided in the Revenue Estimates in accordance with **TMP6 Reporting requirement and management information arrangements**.

1.4 *Credit and Counterparties*

The Authority regards a prime objective of its treasury management activities to be the security of the principal sums invested. A formal counterparty list will be maintained and the named organisations and limits will reflect a prudent attitude towards organisations with which funds may be deposited, and will limit the Authority's investment activities to the instruments, methods and techniques referred to in **TMP4 Approved Instruments, methods and techniques**.

1.5 *Rescheduling & Refinancing of Debt*

The Authority will ensure that all borrowing, private financing and partnership arrangements will be negotiated, structured and documented, and the maturity profile of debt will be managed with a view to obtaining terms for renewal or refinancing, if required, which are competitive and as favourable to the organisation as can reasonably be achieved in the light of market conditions prevailing at the time.

Relationships with counterparties in these transactions will be managed in such a manner as to secure this objective and will avoid over-reliance on any one source of funding if this might jeopardise achievement of the above.

1.6 *Legal and Regulatory*

The Authority will ensure that all of its treasury management activities comply with its statutory powers and regulatory requirements. The Authority will demonstrate such compliance, if required to do so, to all parties with whom it deals in such activities. In framing its credit and counterparty policy under **TMP1.4 *Credit and Counterparties***, the Authority will ensure that there is evidence of counterparties' powers, authority and compliance in respect of the transactions they may affect with the organisation, particularly with regard to duty of care and fees charged.

The Authority will seek to minimise the impact of future legislative or regulatory changes on its treasury management activities so far as it is reasonably able to do so.

1.7 *Fraud, Error and Corruption, and Contingency Management*

The Authority will seek to ensure that it has identified the circumstances which may expose the Authority to the risk of loss through fraud, corruption or other eventualities in its treasury management dealings. Accordingly, it will design and implement suitable systems and procedures, and will maintain effective contingency management arrangements to counter such risks.

1.8 *Market Risk*

The Authority will seek to ensure that its stated treasury management policies and objectives will not be compromised by adverse market fluctuations in the value of the principal sums invested.

2 TMP2 - BEST VALUE AND PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT

2.1 The Authority will actively work to promote best value in its treasury management activities. The treasury management function will be the subject of regular reviews to identify scope for improvement.

3 TMP3 - DECISION-MAKING AND ANALYSIS

3.1 The Authority will maintain full records of its treasury management decisions, and of the processes and practices applied in reaching those decisions to demonstrate that reasonable steps have been taken to ensure that all issues relevant to those decisions were taken into account.

4 TMP4 - APPROVED INSTRUMENTS, METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

4.1 The Authority will undertake its treasury management activities by employing only those instruments, methods and techniques detailed in the Treasury Management Strategy that is shown in Annex J3.

5 TMP5 - ORGANISATION, CLARITY AND SEGREGATION OF RESPONSIBILITIES, AND DEALING ARRANGEMENTS

5.1 The Authority's treasury management activities will be properly structured in a clear and open fashion and a rigorous discipline of segregation of duties will be enforced to ensure effective control and monitoring of its treasury management activities, for the reduction of the risk of fraud or error, and for the pursuit of optimum performance.

5.2 The principle on which this will be based is a clear distinction between those charged with setting treasury management policies and those charged with implementing and controlling these policies, particularly with regard to the execution and transmission of funds, the recording and administering of treasury management decisions, and the audit and review of the treasury management function.

5.3 If and when the Authority intends, as a result of lack of resources or other circumstances, to depart from these principles, the Treasurer will ensure that the reasons are properly reported in accordance with **TMP6 Reporting requirements and management information arrangements**, and the implications properly considered and evaluated.

5.4 The Treasurer will ensure that there are clear written statements of the responsibilities for each post engaged in treasury management, and the arrangements for absence cover.

5.5 The Treasurer will ensure there is proper documentation for all deals and transactions, and that procedures exist for the effective transmission of funds.

5.6 The Treasurer will fulfil all delegated responsibilities in respect of treasury management in accordance with Authority's Treasury Management Policy Statement, Treasury Management Practices and the CIPFA Standard of Professional Practice on Treasury Management.

6 TMP6 - REPORTING REQUIREMENTS AND MANAGEMENT INFORMATION ARRANGEMENTS

6.1 Regular reports will be prepared for consideration by the Authority on:

- the implementation of its treasury management policies
- the effects of decisions taken and the transactions executed in pursuit of those policies

- the implications of changes resulting from regulatory, economic, market or other factors affecting its treasury management activities; and the performance of the treasury management function

6.2 As a minimum, Authority will receive:

- an Annual Report on the strategy and plan to be pursued in the forthcoming year
- an Annual Report on the performance of the treasury management function in the previous year and on any circumstances of non-compliance with the organisation's Treasury Management Policy Statement and Treasury Management Practices

7 TMP7 - BUDGETING, ACCOUNTING AND AUDIT ARRANGEMENTS

7.1 The Authority will account for its treasury management activities in accordance with appropriate accounting practices and standards, and with statutory and regulatory requirements.

7.2 The Authority will ensure that its auditors, and those charged with regulatory review, have access to all information and papers supporting the activities of the treasury management function as are necessary for the proper fulfilment of their roles, and that such information and papers demonstrate compliance with external and internal policies and approved practices.

8 TMP8 - CASH AND CASH FLOW MANAGEMENT

8.1 All Authority monies shall be aggregated for treasury management purposes and will be under the control of the Treasurer. Cash flow projections will be prepared on a regular and timely basis, and the Treasurer will ensure that these are adequate for the purposes of monitoring compliance with **TMP1.2 Liquidity**.

9 TMP 9 - MONEY LAUNDERING

9.1 Procedures will be enforced for verifying and recording the identity of counterparties and reporting suspicions and will ensure that staff involved in this area are properly trained.

10 TMP 10 - STAFF TRAINING AND QUALIFICATIONS

10.1 The Authority will seek to appoint individuals to the treasury management function who are both capable and experienced and will provide training for staff to enable them to acquire and maintain an appropriate level of expertise, knowledge and skills. The Treasurer will recommend and implement the necessary arrangements.

11 TMP 11 - USE OF EXTERNAL SERVICE PROVIDERS

- 11.1 When external service providers are employed by the Authority, the Treasurer will ensure that this is done for reasons which have been submitted to a full evaluation of the costs and benefits. The terms of their appointment and the methods by which service providers' value will be assessed will be properly agreed and documented and subjected to regular review.
- 11.2 Where feasible and necessary, a spread of service providers will be used to avoid over-reliance on one or a small number of companies. Where services are subject to formal tender or re-tender arrangements, Authority Standing Orders and Financial Regulations plus legislative requirements will always be observed. The monitoring of such arrangements rests with the Treasurer.

12 TMP 12 - CORPORATE GOVERNANCE

- 12.1 The Authority is committed to the pursuit of proper corporate governance throughout its businesses and services, and to establishing the principles and practices by which this can be achieved. Accordingly, the treasury management function and its activities will be undertaken with openness and transparency, honesty, integrity and accountability.
- 12.2 The Authority has adopted and implemented the key recommendations of the Code of Practice on Treasury Management in the Public Services. This, together with other arrangements that the Treasurer will put in place, is considered vital to the achievement of proper corporate governance in treasury management, and the Treasurer will monitor and, if and when necessary, report upon the effectiveness of these arrangements.

Annex J3: Treasury Management Strategy 2021/22

The CIPFA Code of Practice for Treasury Management in the Public Services recommends that the Authority draw up an annual Treasury Management Strategy before the start of each financial year, which it may vary at any time.

In implementing this strategy, the Authority will give priority to security and liquidity, rather than yield. However, the Authority will aim to achieve the highest rate of interest consistent with the proper levels of security and liquidity. In order to achieve this, the strategy deals with the use of specified investments, non-specified investments and the liquidity of investments.

The strategy also covers the Authority's approach to borrowing and the use of external managers.

1. Borrowing Strategy 2021/22 – 2023/24

The uncertainty over future interest rates increases the risks associated with treasury activity. As a result, the Authority will take a cautious approach to its treasury strategy.

Long-term fixed interest rates are at risk of being higher over the medium term, and short-term rates are expected to rise, although more modestly. The Treasurer, under delegated powers, will take the most appropriate form of borrowing depending on the prevailing interest rates at the time, taking into account the risks shown in the forecast above. It is likely that shorter term fixed rates may provide lower cost opportunities in the short/medium term.

With the likelihood of long-term rates increasing, debt restructuring is likely to focus on switching from longer term fixed rates to cheaper shorter term debt, although the Treasurer and treasury consultants will monitor prevailing rates for any opportunities during the year.

Continuing to postpone borrowing and running down investment balances will also be considered. This would reduce counterparty risk and hedge against the expected fall in investments returns.

2. Investment Strategy 2021/22 – 2023/24

2.1 Key Objectives

The primary objectives of the Authority's investment strategy are firstly safeguarding the repayment of the principal and interest of its investments on time and secondly ensuring adequate liquidity. The investment return is the third objective. With the current economic background, the current investment climate has one over-riding risk consideration, that of counterparty security risk. As a result of these underlying

concerns, officers are implementing an operational investment strategy which tightens the controls already in place in the approved investment strategy.

2.2 Risk Benchmarking

A development in the revised Codes and the CLG consultation paper is the consideration and approval of security and liquidity benchmarks. Yield benchmarks are currently widely used to assess investment performance. Discrete security and liquidity benchmarks are new requirements to the Member reporting, although the application of these is more subjective in nature.

These benchmarks are simple targets (not limits) and so may be breached from time to time, depending on movements in interest rates and counterparty criteria. The purpose of the benchmark is that officers will monitor the current and trend position and amend the operational strategy depending on any changes. Any breach of the benchmarks will be reported, with supporting reasons in the mid-year or Annual Report.

Security - The Authority's maximum-security risk benchmark for the current portfolio, when compared to these historic default tables, is:

- 0.08% historic risk of default when compared to the whole portfolio.

Liquidity – In respect of this area, the Authority seeks to maintain:

- Liquid short-term deposits of at least £0.5m available with a week's notice
- Weighted Average Life benchmark is expected to be 0.25 years (3 months), with a maximum of 0.5 years (6 months)

Yield - Local measure of yield benchmarks is:

- Investments - Internal returns above the 7-day London Interbank Bid Rate (LIBID)

2.3 Investment Counterparty Selection Criteria

The primary principle governing the Authority's investment criteria is the security of its investments, although the yield or return on the investment is also a key consideration. After this main principle the Authority will ensure:

- It maintains a policy covering both the categories of investment types it will invest in, criteria for choosing investment counterparties with adequate security, and monitoring their security. This is set out in the Specified and Non-Specified investment sections below.
- It has sufficient liquidity in its investments. For this purpose it will set out procedures for determining the maximum periods for which funds may prudently be committed. These procedures also apply to the Authority's prudential indicators covering the maximum principal sums invested.

The Treasurer will maintain a counterparty list in compliance with the following criteria and will revise the criteria and submit them to the Authority for approval as necessary. These criteria are separate to those which choose Specified and Non-Specified investments, as they provide an overall pool of counterparties considered high quality that the Authority may use, rather than defining what its investments are.

The rating criteria use the **lowest common denominator** method of selecting counterparties and applying limits. This means that the application of the Authority's minimum criteria will apply to the lowest available rating for any institution. For instance, if an institution is rated by two agencies, one meets the Authority's criteria, the other does not, the institution will fall outside of the lending criteria. This complies with a CIPFA Treasury Management Panel recommendation in March 2009 and the CIPFA Treasury Management Code of Practice.

Credit rating information is supplied by our treasury consultants on all active counterparties that comply with the criteria below. Any counterparty failing to meet the criteria would be omitted from the counterparty (dealing) list. Any rating changes, rating watches (notification of a likely change), rating outlooks (notification of a possible longer-term change) are provided to officers almost immediately after they occur and this information is considered before dealing. For instance, a negative rating watch applying to a counterparty at the minimum Authority criteria will be suspended from use, with all others being reviewed in light of market conditions.

2.4 Specified Investments

Specified Investments are defined as those satisfying the following conditions:

- a) Denominated in sterling
- b) To be repaid or redeemed within 12 months of the date on which the investment was made
- c) Do not involve the acquisition of share capital or loan capital in any body corporate
- d) Are made with the UK Government, local authorities, parish councils, community councils, housing associations or with a body or in an investment scheme which has been awarded a high credit rating by a credit agency.

The criteria for providing a pool of high-quality investment counterparties are:

Banks 1 - Good Credit Quality

The Authority will only use banks which:

- (a) Are UK banks; and/or
- (b) Are non-UK and domiciled in a country which has a minimum Sovereign long- term rating of AAA;

- (c) And have, as a minimum, the following Fitch, Moody's and Standard & Poors credit ratings (where rated):
 - i. Short Term – F1
 - ii. Long Term – A
 - iii. Individual / Financial Strength – C- (Fitch / Moody's only)
 - iv. Support – 3 (Fitch only)

Banks 2 - Guaranteed Banks with suitable Sovereign Support

In addition, the Authority will use banks whose ratings fall below the criteria specified above if all of the following conditions are met:

- (a) wholesale deposits in the bank are covered by a government guarantee
- (b) the government providing the guarantee is rated "AAA" by all three major rating agencies (Fitch, Moody's and Standard & Poors); and
- (c) the Authority's investments with the bank are limited to amounts and maturities within the terms of the stipulated guarantee.

Banks 3 - Eligible Institutions

The Authority is an eligible institution for the HM Treasury Credit Guarantee Scheme initially announced on 13 October 2008, with the necessary short and long-term ratings required in Banks 1 above. These institutions have been subject to suitability checks before inclusion and have access to HM Treasury liquidity if needed.

Banks 4 - The Authority's own banker for transactional purposes if the bank falls below the above criteria although in this case balances will be minimised in both monetary size and time.

Building Societies

The Authority will use all Societies which meet the ratings for banks outlined above.

Money Market Funds – AAA

UK Government (including gilts and the Debt Management Account Deposit Facility (DMADF))

Other Local Authorities, Parish Councils, Community Councils, Housing Associations

2.5 Non - Specified Investments

Non-Specified investments are those not meeting the definition in the Specified Investments section above. It is proposed that during 2021/22, the Authority will not invest in Non-Specified Investments, including those to be repaid or redeemed more than 12 months from the date on which the investment was made.

2.6 Use of additional information other than credit ratings

Additional requirements under the Code of Practice now require the Authority to supplement credit rating information. Whilst the above criteria rely primarily on the application of credit ratings to provide a pool of appropriate counterparties for officers to use, additional operational market information will be applied before making any specific investment decision from the agreed pool of counterparties. This additional market information (for example credit default swaps, negative rating watches/ outlooks) will be applied to compare the relative security of differing investment counterparties.

2.7 Time and Monetary Limits applying to Investments

The time and monetary limits for institutions on the Authority's Counterparty List are set out in Table 23 below:

Table 23: Time and Monetary Limits of Investments

	Fitch (or equivalent)	Money Limit	Time Limit
Limit 1 Category	AAA	£4m	1 year
Money Market Funds	AAA	£4m	1 year
Limit 2 Category	AA	£4m	1 year
Eligible Institutions	AA	£4m	1 year
Limit 3 Category	A	£1m	3 months
Eligible Institutions	A	£1m	3 months
UK Government		unlimited	1 year
Other Local Authorities		£2m	1 year

Due to the uncertainty in the financial markets it is recommended that the Investment Strategy is approved on a similar approach to previous years which will provide officers with the flexibility to deal with any unexpected occurrences. Officers will restrict the pool of available counterparties from these criteria to safer instruments and institutions. Currently this involves the use of the UK Government Debt Management Account Deposit Facility, AAA rated Money Market Funds and institutions with higher credit ratings than those outlined in the investment strategy or which are provided support from the Government. Investments are being maintained short term to also improve the security of investments.

2.8 Sensitivity to Interest Rate Movements

Whilst most of the risks facing the treasury management service are addressed elsewhere in this report (credit risk, liquidity risk, market risk, maturity profile risk), the impact of interest rate risk is discussed but not quantified.

The estimated impact of a 1% increase or decrease in interest rates to the estimated treasury management income for the Authority in 2021/22 is an increase or decrease of £80,000.

3. External Managers (Other than those relating to the Pension Fund)

The Authority may, upon the recommendations of the Treasurer, appoint one or more external managers to manage the short-term investment of surplus Authority money. Any such managers appointed are to be bound by this Treasury Management Policy Statement.

SECTION K

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Set out below is a summary of the recommendations on which Members' views are sought.

SECTION B – Consultation (page 3)

That Members take into account the views of those consulted as they consider the budget and Medium-Term Financial Plan proposals.

SECTION C – Local Government Finance Settlement (page 4)

That the Authority notes the 2021/22 settlement funding assessment and the uncertainty around the funding position from 2022/23 onwards.

SECTION D – Reserves Strategy (page 5)

That the Authority agrees to the policy for reserves, that the Authority will:

- Set aside sufficient sums in earmarked reserves as it considers prudent to do so.
- Aim to maintain a general reserve of 5% of the net expenditure; currently £1.45m.

SECTION E – Medium-Term Financial Plan (page 9)

That the Authority:

- (a) Agrees the Medium-Term Financial Plan.
- (b) Notes the Treasurer's comments on the robustness of the estimates, the adequacy of reserves and the risks in the budget, as set out in the separate report under Section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003.

SECTION F – Revenue Budget (page 16)

That the Authority adopts the following resolutions:

- (a) That the revised revenue budget for 2020/21, as set out in Appendix A be approved.
- (b) That the Treasurer be authorised to make any proper accounting transactions that would be in the interests of the Authority in relation to the accounts for 2020/21.
- (c) That the revenue budget for 2021/22, as set out in Appendix A be approved.

SECTION G – Capital Strategy (page 17)

That the Authority approves the revised capital budget for 2020/21 and the capital budgets for 2021/22 to 2024/25.

SECTION H – Fire Authority Council Tax Requirement (page 24)

That Members determine the level of Council Tax for 2021/22 based on the Net Expenditure of £29,337,855. Based on the recommendation of the Finance Committee, it is recommended for the year ending 31st March 2022:

- i. That the 'council tax base' for the whole of the Authority's area be £175,102.80
- ii. That there be no Authority expenses relating to a part only of the Authority's area
- iii. That the Authority increases Council Tax by 1.96% to £107.55 for a Band D property
- iv. That the Net Expenditure be £29,337,855 and that, (after taking into account revenue support grant of £3,499,067 business rates income of £1,431,840, top up grant of £5,691,126, and a deficit on the collection fund of £116,484, precepts totalling £18,832,306.14 be issued to Durham County Council and Darlington Borough Council.

SECTION I – Prudential Code (page 25)

- (a) That the Authority notes the prudential indicators.
- (b) That the Authority approves the MRP Statement.
- (c) That the Authority approves the following limits for external debt in 2021/22:
 - i. Authorised Limit of £15.327m
 - ii. Operational Boundary of £13.934m

SECTION J – Treasury Management (page 31)

- (a) That the Authority formally adopts the key recommendations of the CIPFA code.
- (b) That the Authority notes the Annual Treasury Management Strategy.
- (c) That the Authority sets an upper limit on its fixed interest rate exposures for 2021/22, 2022/23 and 2023/24 of 100% of its net outstanding principal sum.
- (d) That the Authority sets an upper limit on its variable interest rate exposures for 2021/22, 2022/23 and 2023/24 of 30% of its net outstanding principal sums.

APPENDIX A

COUNTY DURHAM AND DARLINGTON FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

REVENUE BUDGET

Budget Heading	Original Estimate 2020/21 £	Revised Estimate 2020/21 £	Original Estimate 2021/22 £
Employees			
Salaries and Wages	19,035,625	18,998,009	19,462,786
Pension Contributions	3,900,048	3,883,581	4,295,252
Ill Health Charges	715,000	715,000	728,409
Other	434,946	434,422	441,422
Total Employees Costs	24,085,619	24,031,012	24,927,869
Premises	2,824,066	2,824,066	2,802,025
Transport	610,739	613,739	624,690
Supplies & Services	4,369,514	4,367,615	4,482,713
Capital Financing	1,231,177	1,231,177	1,329,906
Contingencies	280,057	333,563	265,246
Capital Charges	3,094,533	2,496,695	2,756,396
GROSS EXPENDITURE	36,495,705	35,897,867	37,188,845
Income	-4,077,773	-4,077,773	-4,882,519
Contribution from Reserve	-150,000	-150,000	-222,075
Reversal of Capital Charges	-3,094,533	-2,496,695	-2,756,396
NET EXPENDITURE	29,173,399	29,173,399	29,327,855

County Durham and Darlington
Fire and Rescue Authority



Safest People, Safest Places

Combined Fire Authority

19 February 2021

**Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and
Rescue Services Update**

Report of the Area Manager Assets and Assurance

Purpose of the report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update on the COVID-19 thematic inspection of Fire and Rescue Services in England and next steps of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS).

Background

2. In August 2020, under section 28A(3) of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, HMICFRS were commissioned by the Home Secretary to inspect the response to the COVID-19 pandemic of the fire and rescue sector in England.
3. Specifically, the inspectorate was asked to consider:
 - (a) what is working well and what is being learnt;
 - (b) how the fire and rescue sector is responding to the COVID-19 crisis;
 - (c) how fire and rescue services are dealing with the problems they face; and
 - (d) what changes are likely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. The scope of the inspection included:
 - (a) Activity to protect communities and limit the spread of COVID-19, including the tripartite agreement;
 - (b) Safety and wellbeing of staff during COVID-19;
 - (c) Maintenance of statutory functions during COVID-19;
 - (d) Sharing and promoting best practice during COVID-19; and
 - (e) Capability to co-ordinate and broker requests for mutual aid during COVID-19.
5. County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service (CDDFRS) was inspected the week beginning 2 November 2020. The inspection was conducted entirely virtually, with interviews using Microsoft Teams.
6. HMICFRS previously indicated they would aim to restart the round two Fire and Rescue Services inspection programme in early 2021, running through to autumn 2022.

Thematic COVID-19 Inspection Outcome

7. Unlike previous inspections there was no grading for Fire and Rescue Services, instead the inspectorate produced a written report setting out their assessment of the effectiveness of the Service's response to the pandemic.
8. They also produced an overarching report on the whole sectors' response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
9. A copy of CDDFRS's report is attached as Appendix A.
10. In summary, the Service adapted and responded to the pandemic effectively. It continued to maintain its statutory functions, including responding to emergencies. It adapted its approach to prevention and protection activities to enhance social distancing and keep communities safe. It was willing to give extra support to partners, but there was little requirement for staff to do additional activities.
11. The report was complementary about CDDFRS increasing operational staffing to ensure continued delivery of statutory duties; providing fast-tracked testing for staff at local hospitals; improved communications and effectively using technology to allow staff to work remotely with very little or no effect on performance.
12. There were two areas identified where the Service can learn lessons and work is already underway to build this learning into future plans. These were:
 - a. The Service should use the lessons it has learned from the pandemic to date, to update its plans, including its business continuity and pandemic flu plans; and
 - b. The Service should identify those staff at a higher risk from COVID-19, so it can put appropriate wellbeing and support provisions in place.

National Thematic COVID-19 Inspection Report

13. The national report highlighted that overall Fire and Rescue Services responded very well to the outbreak maintaining their ability to respond to fires and other emergencies, although in some cases response was prioritised to the detriment of prevention and protection activities.
14. The report also highlighted strong multi-agency working in every area through Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) and the fire sector coming together well to support national guidance.
15. The report recognised the hard work and enormous dedication of many across the fire and rescue sector with the support given to communities, with firefighters and staff stepping up to take on a range of pandemic activities, including driving ambulances, delivering essential items to the most vulnerable and personal protective equipment (PPE) to those working in healthcare.
16. The report discusses in some detail, the 'tripartite agreement' which was designed to enable the National Employers, National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) and Fire Brigades Union (FBU) to determine the additional activities firefighters would carry out in support of the Fire and Rescue Services' response to the pandemic. It highlights that despite the initial intentions of those involved, the mechanism rapidly became too prescriptive and, in some services, it became a hindrance rather than a help.
17. A copy of the national report is attached as Appendix B.

Round Two Fire and Rescue Service Inspections

18. HMICFRS have confirmed plans to continue their round two inspection programme albeit, in an appropriately modified way. They intend to restart the Fire and Rescue Services inspection programme in February 2021, running through to September 2022.
19. All inspection activity will be done remotely until the current restrictions lift and they will spread virtual activity over a longer window. The Inspectorate intends to speak to each Chief Fire Officer to discuss how they can complete the inspection in the least disruptive way.
20. CDDFRS's inspection is expected to be in tranche 3 with fieldwork inspection activity taking place between March and September 2022 with the report published in Winter 2022.

Recommendations

21. CFA Members are requested to:
 - a. **note** the contents of this report;
 - b. **receive** further reports as appropriate.

Keith Carruthers, Area Manager Assets and Assurance, ext: 5564

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

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Wendy Williams

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

Stuart Errington
Chief Fire Officer
County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor John Robinson
Chair
County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Errington and Cllr Robinson,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: COUNTY DURHAM AND DARLINGTON 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 2 and 13 November 2020. This letter summarises our findings.
5. In relation to your service, County Durham and Darlington Local Resilience Forum (LRF) declared a major incident on 24 March 2020.
6. In summary, the service adapted and responded to the pandemic effectively. It continued to maintain its statutory functions, including responding to emergencies. It adapted its approach

to prevention and protection activities to enhance social distancing and keep communities safe. It was willing to give extra support to partners, but there was very little requirement for staff to do additional activities.

7. Resources were well managed, and the service's financial position was unaffected. The service was able to respond quickly to staff absences. It implemented work to build resilience in its control room and on fire stations. It also arranged for a fast-track COVID-19 test facility for staff at the local hospital. The service adapted its communication with staff during the pandemic, including on issues relating to staff wellbeing. Staff who worked remotely had access to the resources they needed to do their jobs effectively with very little or no effect on performance.

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. In order to be as efficient and effective as possible, County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service should focus on the following areas:

(a) The service should use the lessons it has learned from the pandemic to date, to update its plans, including its business continuity and pandemic flu plans.

(b) The service should identify those staff at a higher risk from COVID-19, so it can put appropriate wellbeing and support provisions in place.

Preparing for the pandemic

9. In line with good governance, the service had a pandemic flu plan and business continuity plans in place that were in date. These plans were activated.

10. 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.

11. The service has reviewed its plans to reflect the changing situation and what it has learned during the pandemic.

12. A bespoke COVID-19 plan was quickly developed. The service's plans now include further detail on social distancing, making premises 'COVID-secure', remote working and supply of personal protective equipment (PPE).

Fulfilling statutory functions

13. 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.

14. 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 adapted its

prevention work by introducing safe and well visits by telephone. It adapted its protection work by introducing desktop audits.

Response

15. 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.

16. 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 92.3 percent compared with 81.0 percent during the same period in 2019. This was as a result of an increased number of on-call firefighters being available to respond to emergencies because of being furloughed from their primary employment.

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

18. 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.

19. The service had good arrangements in place so that its control room had enough staff during the pandemic. This included effective resilience arrangements, including training more staff for control room roles, re-engaging retired control operators and restricting access to the control room to improve social distancing.

Prevention

20. The NFCC issued guidance explaining how services should take a risk-based approach to continuing to provide 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.

22. The service decided to continue offering face-to-face safe and well visits to those people it considered to be high risk on a risk-assessed basis. It gave staff suitable PPE to carry out this activity.

23. The service introduced the option of a safe and well visit by telephone instead of face-to-face safe and well visits. It also introduced a virtual/online safe and well visit. We welcome the use of this technology to support the public.

Protection

24. 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.
25. The service didn't review how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic. It already considered care homes to be high risk, and confirmed them as being at an increased risk from fire. It contacted all care homes in the service area to give extra advice and support about fire safety and evacuation plans.
26. The service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it would normally undertake.
27. The service continued with enforcement activity and continued to respond to statutory building control consultations.
28. The service introduced risk-based desktop appraisals to minimise face-to-face contact between members of staff and the public. As a result, it conducted some face-to-face fire safety audits and enforcement activity on a risk-assessed basis and gave staff suitable PPE to do so. It also sent and received still images and video electronically and added more information to its website.

Staff health and safety and wellbeing

29. The service considered staff wellbeing during the pandemic and responded to any concerns and further needs from staff. Senior leaders 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 the employee assistance programme, online physiotherapy webinars and online fitness videos).
31. 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.
32. The service has discussed with its staff how it should plan for the potential longer-term effects of COVID-19 on its workforce.
33. The service made sure that firefighters were competent to do their work during the pandemic. This included keeping up to date with all of the firefighter fitness requirements.
34. The service assessed the risks of new work to make sure its staff had the skills and equipment needed to work safely and effectively.

35. The service provided its workforce with suitable PPE on time. It participated in the national fire sector scheme to procure PPE and also sourced local providers.

Staff absence

36. 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 4.1 percent compared with the same period in 2019.

37. 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 and testing. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home. The service arranged with the local hospital a fast-track COVID-19 testing facility for staff. This meant staff could access a test (and their results) more quickly, to help manage both their wellbeing and absence from work.

Staff engagement

38. 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, emails, updates to the service intranet and weekly video messages with staff about wellbeing and health and safety. Similar arrangements were put in place for the service's on-call staff.

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 on a voluntary basis. 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. Although the service had trained members of staff ready and available to support partner agencies, there was limited demand for help, as the LRF had identified extra capability elsewhere, including from the local council and military. The service's on-call firefighters and non-operational staff assisted with the delivery of essential items and PPE. Wholetime and on-call firefighters were trained to drive ambulances to support North East Ambulance Service, although ultimately, they weren't required.

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 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 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 with the FBU to implement the tripartite agreement. It engaged with the Fire Officers' Association, UNISON and GMB during the pandemic.

43. The work done by the service under the tripartite agreement was agreed in time for it to start promptly and in line with the request from the partner agency.

44. All new work under the tripartite agreement, including that planned but not ultimately requested, was risk-assessed and complied with the health and safety requirements.

Local resilience forum

45. 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. County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service is a member of County Durham and Darlington LRF.

46. 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.

47. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the service chaired the tactical co-ordination group and the regional co-ordination group. The chief fire officer is the National Fire Chief Council lead for LRFs, representing LRF chairs on a working group that set the direction and agenda for the weekly LRF chairs national COVID-19 call. It was a member of the following cells: media, intelligence and data; excess death; voluntary and community sector; recovery; PPE; and multi-agency information. 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.

49. 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, IT and making premises 'COVID-secure'. 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.

50. The service received £598,784 of extra government funding to support its response. By the end of October 2020, it had spent all of this money on extra staffing, PPE, IT, making premises COVID-secure, cleaning and decontamination. It has shown how it used this income efficiently and hasn't used any of its reserves to meet extra costs. The service mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period.

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

Ways of working

52. The service changed how it operates during the pandemic. For example, staff worked remotely. 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.

53. The service was able to quickly implement changes to how it operated. 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.

54. The service has had positive feedback from staff on how they were engaged with during the pandemic. As a result, the service changed its weekly written messages to videos. 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.

55. 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

56. 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.

57. 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, as well as ongoing projects and other organisations. As a result, the service has been able to advance their implementation of National Operational Guidance and bring forward some work on their on-call project.

58. As well as performing their statutory functions, wholetime and on-call firefighters volunteered to drive ambulances under the tripartite agreement. But ultimately, this support wasn't requested. For most of the pandemic, the main role for wholetime firefighters was to respond to incidents and assist with prevention activity. We expect services to keep their processes under review to make sure they use their wholetime workforces as productively as possible.

59. There was an increase in on-call availability during the pandemic. This allowed the service to split the on-call crews into smaller groups to continue their training. Competent on-call firefighters were able to volunteer for shifts of absent wholetime staff. This provided the service with short-term resourcing resilience when required.

60. As part of its workforce planning, the service re-engaged retired members of staff to provide resilience across the control room and training department.

61. The service gave enough consideration to making sure its re-engaged staff were operationally competent for the work they were asked to do.

Governance of the service's response

62. 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.

63. County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Authority was 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.

64. The fire and rescue authority put arrangements in place to give its members relevant and regular information about how the service is responding to the pandemic. It made use of technology and held meetings virtually, which helped maintain a constructive relationship.

65. 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

66. 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.

67. County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service has felt the benefits of a modern, reliable ICT infrastructure. It is considering how virtual platforms and remote working can help it become more effective and efficient. The introduction of telephone safe and well calls and virtual home fire safety visits has helped the service to target more people in the community. It is reviewing how it can use these platforms to work with local businesses. Consistent communication with all staff has improved engagement. The service is considering how to enhance remote training using virtual platforms.

68. Good practice and learning was shared with other services in the region. The service also produced information about the cleaning of breathing apparatus sets, which it provided to the NFCC for use by other services.

Next steps

69. 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 blue ink, appearing to read "Wendy Williams", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.**Wendy Williams**

Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary

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Responding to the pandemic

The fire and rescue service's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020

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Foreword

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global health emergency on a scale not seen in our lifetime. In August 2020, the Home Secretary commissioned us to inspect how fire and rescue authorities in England responded to the COVID-19 outbreak and the numerous challenges it presents. This report gives an overview of our findings.

To do this, we inspected England's 45 fire and rescue services from September to November 2020. Our focus was on how they responded during the initial period of the pandemic. We conducted our inspections entirely virtually – the first time we have done so. I am grateful for the positive manner in which the services and our staff adapted to this new way of working.

Overall, fire and rescue services responded very well to the outbreak. They maintained their ability to respond to fires and other emergencies in these extraordinary times. Many supported communities in ways that extended far beyond their statutory duties, with firefighters and staff stepping up to take on a range of pandemic activities, including driving ambulances, and delivering essential items to the most vulnerable and personal protective equipment (PPE) to those working in healthcare. Sadly, they were also called upon to help move the bodies of the deceased. I recognise the hard work and enormous dedication of so many across the fire and rescue sector, who provided much-needed additional humanitarian support to their communities.

The pandemic was a catalyst for many fire and rescue services to transform, modernising some of their working practices to become more effective and efficient.

All services put in place extra measures to support and protect their staff, although in some services more could have been done to proactively identify and engage with those who may have been more vulnerable to the virus and might have needed tailored support. With the continuing spread of the virus, services should continue to talk to staff who may be vulnerable and offer the appropriate assistance.

We have made six national recommendations since our first fire and rescue services inspection in 2018, two at the end of our [second tranche](#) of inspections in summer 2019 and four more in [State of Fire and Rescue 2019](#) in January 2020. They cover the most important factors affecting how services operate, and include:

- better standardisation of practice;
- clarity on the role of services and their staff;
- considering whether the arrangements governing staff terms and conditions remain appropriate; and
- providing greater operational independence for chief fire officers.

All these issues came to the fore during the pandemic. While, understandably, there has been a delay in implementing some of our recommendations, the need for improvement and reform remains.

Fire and rescue services are ‘can do’ organisations that want to help their communities. But too many services faced barriers in mobilising operational staff to assist with pandemic activities as effectively and rapidly as they would have wished. It is deeply regrettable that fire and rescue services would have been better placed to assist local communities at their time of greatest need had it not been for the restrictive industrial relations arrangements. This ultimately had the effect of tying the hands of chief fire officers and too often delaying the safe deployment of the right people with the right skills as quickly as their communities needed them.

We describe, in some detail, how a mechanism known as the ‘tripartite agreement’ was designed to enable the National Employers, National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) and Fire Brigades Union (FBU) to determine the additional activities firefighters would carry out in support of the fire and rescue services’ response to the pandemic. Despite the initial intentions of those involved, the mechanism rapidly became too prescriptive. In some services, it became a hindrance rather than a help.

We question the need for a mechanism such as the tripartite agreement in the first place, not least where staff are ready, willing and able to assist. We think the public would expect greater flexibility of the fire and rescue service during this global health emergency. Specifically, chief fire officers should be unhindered in their ability to deploy their workforce rapidly, safely and effectively so as to protect the public.

However valuable the role of trade unions in protecting their members’ interests, we don’t consider it appropriate for the FBU to have been given the ability to delay or veto the reasonable and safe deployment of firefighters to assist the public during a national emergency.

Looking forward, public-spirited firefighters and staff want to help their communities through the pandemic. It is in everyone’s interest to vaccinate the population as quickly as possible. I am encouraged that some fire and rescue services are making great strides to support the vaccination programme using firefighters and staff from within their own workforce. They are doing so with the necessary and reasonable measures in place to protect the health and safety of those stepping forward to help with this work. Others look set to follow.

At the time of publication, England has entered another national lockdown and some of the challenges presented in the early days of the pandemic have resurfaced and increased.

In conclusion, the fire and rescue service can be proud of how it responded during the initial stages of the pandemic, and the support it gave communities. Our comments on the barriers to doing more shouldn’t detract from our recognition of the important and significant contribution fire and rescue services made and continue to make. Fire and rescue services, firefighters and staff stepped up and supported their communities well beyond what they would normally do.

Nonetheless, now is a pivotal time for the country in terms of the fight against the virus. The fire service has much more to offer in supporting the mass vaccination programme and other pandemic activities; thereby matching the ambition of fire service leaders and the commitment of their staff. The barriers dominating the sector need to be overcome or resolved. The sector should look to the good work outlined in this report and continue to serve its communities to the best of its ability. I know there is a desire to do more, and I hope that all those vested with the power to enable this to happen will do so.

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

HMI Zoë Billingham

About this report

We suspended all inspection activity requiring appreciable input from fire and rescue services (and police forces) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. This was done to remove the administrative demand we place on services during our inspections, allowing them to focus instead on their response to the pandemic.

In August 2020, the Home Secretary commissioned us to inspect the English fire and rescue authorities' response to COVID-19. Our commission, under section 28A(3) of the [Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004](#), was to consider:

- 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.

The inspection covered the first peak of the pandemic, in the period between April to June 2020. We completed inspection activity during autumn 2020, when restrictions were easing. It was our first entirely virtual inspection, with all activity taking place remotely.

We also interviewed national leads from the fire and rescue sector, and other interested parties, including:

- national and local government;
- the NFCC;
- the fire and rescue service's National Employers;
- representative bodies, including the FBU, Fire and Rescue Services Association, Fire Officers Association and UNISON; and
- devolved administrations.

This report presents our overall findings on the sector's preparation and response to the pandemic. We will consider them in future inspections. We have detailed the findings and focus areas for improvement for each fire and rescue service in 44 [individual letters](#). We gave a narrative rather than a graded judgment in all inspections covered by this inspection, as we had no benchmark to measure against. We will revert to giving graded judgments when round-two inspections restart in spring 2021.

How we use our data is explained at Annex A.

Headline findings

Every service maintained its ability to respond to fires and other emergencies

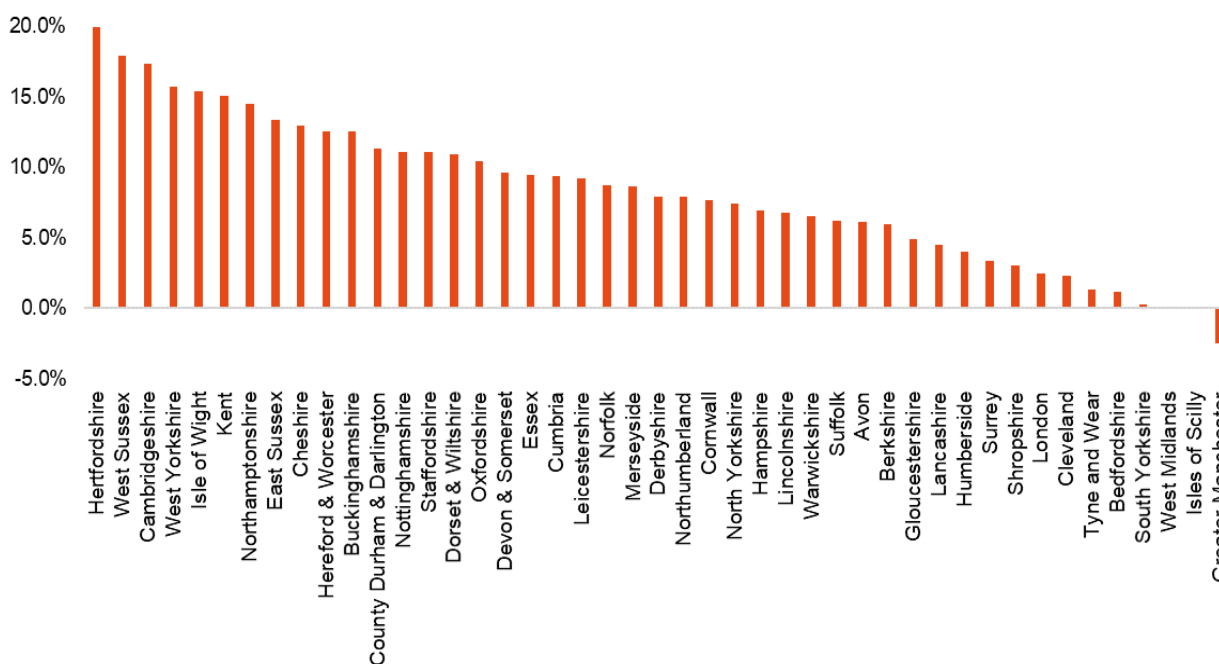
Every service was able to respond to calls from the public, incidents and emergencies when needed. Most prioritised responding to emergencies over other activities. They also put in place measures to reduce the risk of exposure to the virus, ensuring firefighters and control room staff remained available.

Staff absences were low and on-call firefighter availability was high during the first wave of the pandemic. There are several reasons for this, including steps taken by services to limit the spread of the virus.

The overall number of incidents attended by services fell 5 percent from 1 April to 30 June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019.

Fire engine availability data shows that 43 (of 45) services had more fire engines available to respond to calls from 1 April 2020 to 30 June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019. The graph in figure 1 sets out this data in detail.

Figure 1: Percentage change in overall availability from 1 April–30 June 2019 to 1 April–30 June 2020 by fire and rescue service



Every service provided a range of additional support to its community that went above and beyond its statutory duties

The role of fire and rescue services is listed in legislation, predominantly the [Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004](#). It comprises:

- fire safety;
- firefighting;
- rescuing people in road traffic collisions;
- responding to emergencies;
- enforcing building safety regulations in the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005; and
- responding to certain incidents such as chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear emergencies.

To support their communities during the pandemic, fire and rescue services did more than their 'business as usual' activities. Additional pandemic work included ambulance driving and delivering food to the vulnerable and PPE to healthcare professionals. Most of the activities carried out were listed in the tripartite agreement, but some services provided other support to their community under local agreement. What each service did varied and depended on what their local partners required of them and which part of the workforce was willing to carry it out.

- Some services didn't receive any requests from local partners for additional support.
- While additional activity varied between services, it was provided by different staff groups, including wholetime (that is, full-time) and on-call firefighters, as well as non-operational staff. The table at figure 2 shows a list of all these additional activities that took place under the tripartite agreement. This information is set out by service at Annex B.
- A small number of services were asked to lend their support but couldn't provide enough wholetime firefighters to do the work because the FBU objected. For example, the union had concerns with risk assessments, which are ultimately the responsibility of each fire and rescue service. Other staff, including on-call firefighters and non-operational staff, were sometimes deployed instead of wholetime firefighters.
- We were particularly impressed with how some county council run services worked with council departments and colleagues to increase their knowledge of, presence and work in the community. It shows how fire and rescue services can benefit from being part of a larger organisation, particularly being able to share IT and IT infrastructure and exchange information, especially in the current climate.

Figure 2: Additional pandemic activities carried out by fire and rescue services provided under the tripartite agreement [between 1 April 2020 and 17 September 2020]

Additional pandemic activity listed under the tripartite agreement	Number of services out of 45
Ambulance driving	19
Delivering essential items to vulnerable persons	33
Moving bodies of the deceased	16
Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff working with COVID-19 patients	22
Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities	32
Taking samples for COVID-19 antigen testing	5
Driving ambulances not on blue lights (that is, without a siren), excluding COVID-19 patients, to outpatient appointments or to receive urgent care	8
Training non-service personnel to drive ambulances (not on blue lights)	5
Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people	21
Transferring known or suspected COVID-19 patients to and from Nightingale hospitals under emergency response (on blue lights – that is, with a siren) or through non-emergency patient transfer (not on blue lights)	2
Transferring patients, including those recovering and recuperating from but no longer infected with COVID-19 to and from Nightingale hospitals under emergency response (on blue lights) or through non-emergency patient transfer (not on blue lights)	3
Delivering infection, prevention and control training packages for care homes, including hand hygiene products, and PPE guidance and procedures, and supporting the testing of care home staff	10

The fire and rescue sector's outdated arrangements hindered the way services responded

We have made six national recommendations since we began inspecting fire and rescue services in 2018. The recommendations cover important structural issues relating to how the fire and rescue sector operates, including:

- better standardisation of practice;
- clarity on the role of services and their staff;
- considering whether the arrangements governing staff terms and conditions remain appropriate; and
- providing greater operational independence for chief fire officers.

All these structural problems affected the way services operated during the pandemic and reveal the sector's current limitations. This is despite the dedication and determination of services and their staff to provide the best possible outcome for the public.

The call we made in [State of Fire and Rescue 2019](#) for lasting national reform remains. Reform is necessary and essential, particularly in three areas.

First, to clarify the role of services. This became especially apparent when firefighters could, in many cases, carry out additional responsibilities to support partner agencies only after the national tripartite agreement on specific activities.

Second, to provide chief fire officers operational independence. The ability for chief fire officers to allocate resources rapidly, safely and effectively where required should be an integral part of their role. During the pandemic, local resilience forums (LRFs) asked their fire and rescue services to assist. In some instances, services couldn't commit resources there and then, sometimes requiring a national agreement to proceed.

Third, to reform arrangements governing staff terms and conditions. Throughout the pandemic, the fire and rescue sector's motto has been 'ready, willing and able'. However, the outdated arrangements for negotiating workforce issues meant some services were unable to realise that aim as fully as they wished.

The effect of the tripartite agreement varied from service to service

The employment arrangements in the fire and rescue sector are longstanding and, in our view, outdated. The National Joint Council (NJC) oversees conditions of service for firefighters (included in what is known as the 'grey book'). Despite repeated calls for reform, this hasn't been reviewed for years. While it provides standard terms and conditions for firefighters, it has also established a rigid set of national arrangements. Some services have been able to put in place arrangements to adapt what they do in local circumstances. Others haven't and consider the grey book a barrier.

In [State of Fire and Rescue 2019](#), we called for these arrangements to be reviewed to consider whether they are still fit for purpose and if they establish, maintain or intensify intended or unintended barriers. We also recommended that consideration is given as to whether the NJC – the pay negotiation machinery – needs reform.

This recommendation remains open. To overcome the rigid arrangements, the national tripartite agreement was put in place to temporarily expand what operational staff could do during the pandemic. The agreement was between the NFCC, National Employers and the FBU. If additional roles were requested, they needed national agreement and further local consultation before work could start.

In March 2020, the first of 15 tripartite agreements was agreed to increase the scope of work that operational staff could do. Each service then had to consult locally on the specific work it had been asked to support to agree how to address any health and safety requirements, including risk assessments.

The arrangements under the tripartite agreement stopped in December 2020 and a new agreement was reached without the NFCC, involving only the National Employers and the FBU. Unfortunately, this new arrangement collapsed on 13 January 2021. At the time of publication, professional risk assessments provided by the NFCC are in place and provide appropriate control measures for staff. The National Employers support the risk assessments, and the onus is now on operational staff to volunteer to step forward for their communities. This can be done under local agreements specifying the work operational staff in each individual service will be undertaking.

- The tripartite agreement played a role in enabling services to use their staff in different ways, such as driving ambulances and delivering food to the vulnerable. The initial intention behind it was pragmatic and rooted in the desire on all parts to help the public, but in some cases, it had a limiting or even negative effect, including creating delays to activity already underway. Annex B sets out which activities were carried out by each service.
- There were national and local issues implementing the agreement, which became too prescriptive. For example, services were only able to deliver items to the most vulnerable once that specific activity had been listed in a national tripartite agreement. If it had focused on broad principles, the agreement would have given individual services the flexibility to make decisions on how to deploy staff.
- Because of the restrictive nature of this agreement, several services used other staff to provide this additional work who weren't bound by the tripartite agreement, such as non-operational employees. Deploying non-operational staff was often quicker and easier than using wholetime firefighters, even though they may not have had the same skills. We also found that services were able to deploy their on-call staff more flexibly through offering them additional hours and secondment contracts.

The pandemic demonstrated what on-call firefighters and non-operational staff offer fire and rescue services and the public

Most services have on-call firefighters. On-call firefighters are generally employed on a part-time basis in locations where the local risk doesn't require full-time fire cover. These are firefighters who may have other jobs, but who respond to emergencies when called. Fire and rescue services used them extensively during the first wave of the pandemic to respond to emergencies, as well as provide additional support to their communities.

- The majority of on-call firefighters were available to support their fire and rescue service as needed, as many were furloughed from their primary employment or working from home. Consequently, most services with on-call staff had more fire engines available to respond to emergencies than before the pandemic.
- On-call firefighters were willing to work flexibly to fill a range of roles, including delivering food to the vulnerable, supporting local ambulance trusts and covering staff absences.
- Services took steps to mitigate any financial hardship these individuals might have faced if their primary employment was affected by the pandemic. This included offering them paid employment or short-term contracts.
- Non-operational staff (including those who work in non-uniformed roles, such as prevention) also volunteered to help. Services told us of their willingness and ability to assist.

The way services maintained statutory prevention and protection functions varied, and some did less than expected

Services have had to balance the need to act responsibly during a public health emergency – that is, work out how to reduce the risk of exposure to the virus – with meeting their statutory duty to promote and enforce fire safety and fire safety legislation.

The NFCC provided advice on how services could maintain a risk-based approach to prevention and protection activity. However, not every service aligned its activity to NFCC guidance. Four services exceeded the requirements of the guidance and eight stopped the majority of protection activity during the early stages of the pandemic.

In the first round of our inspections, between 2018 and 2019, we raised concerns that too many services didn't see their protection function as a high enough priority and had under-invested in it for many years. It is concerning that some services have chosen to deprioritise it during the pandemic.

The wellbeing provision offered to staff during COVID-19 was generally good, but varied

We saw that services placed importance on staff wellbeing. Some enhanced their wellbeing provision and tailored it to the outbreak, directing staff to additional help where necessary. However, more could have been done in a third of services to make sure staff who may have been at greater risk, such as those from a black or ethnic minority background, were identified and correct provisions put in place to offer them relevant support. We were pleased to find evidence of this happening in 29 services. Guidance from [Public Health England](#) says some people may not be prepared to disclose their individual circumstances. It is incumbent on services to talk to all their staff to identify risks and provide appropriate support.

The pandemic was a catalyst for change and transformation

In our first inspections (between 2018 and 2019) we found that a small number of services had done little to transform and modernise the ways they work. The pandemic changed that quite dramatically for the better.

- Some services implemented improvement programmes within days of the first lockdown being announced, rolling out new IT and supporting infrastructure. Existing improvement programmes were brought forward and implemented in weeks rather than months. And existing barriers preventing the exchange of information between partners were removed.
- Transformation mostly benefitted non-operational staff, whose working lives have been revolutionised with the introduction of digital and flexible working in many services. However, this rarely translated into improvements in the working practices or productivity of operational staff, including firefighters. Services should take their experience of digital and workplace transformation and use it to make firefighter time as productive as possible while on station. This could include providing prevention advice remotely to vulnerable people.
- When the pandemic began, services implemented changes, such as re-deploying staff, reducing community activity and changing working practices, in anticipation of much higher sickness levels. Thankfully, these levels failed to materialise at the time of inspection. However, some services were slow to undo their changes, whether returning re-deployed staff or restarting activity that had been stopped.

Findings

There was strong multi-agency working in every area, supported and facilitated by LRFs

Most services were heavily involved in their LRFs and worked proactively with partners and other agencies to respond to the pandemic.

LRFs are multi-agency partnerships made up of representatives from local public services. They are responsible for planning and preparing for localised incidents and catastrophic emergencies. The long-lasting nature of the pandemic has put these forums under great strain. While LRFs are arranged by police force boundaries, some services such as those in the South West of England, have created regional groupings to share learning and advice.

LRF activity was carried out in a co-ordinated way, and forums and their members effectively supported their communities. Service leaders rose to the challenge and, in most cases, exceeded the expectations of their role in the forums – members told us that fire and rescue colleagues proactively contributed to an exceptional level.

The strength of LRFs is having local organisations, including the fire and rescue service, police force, ambulance trust and local authority present at meetings to share out tasks and agree mutual priorities. However, when asked, some services couldn't immediately agree to completing additional tasks. If the request was outside the scope of the firefighter role, they needed the national tripartite agreement to be in place, followed by further consultation with local representative, before they could agree to it. We found that at least 11 services had experienced some delay before beginning work. The agreement process sometimes took several weeks. Without this barrier, their response could have been quicker and more comprehensive. LRF members told us they sometimes avoided asking fire and rescue services to help because of these difficulties.

Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service's partner agencies requested that, in its capacity as a 24/7 emergency service, it 'door knock' on vulnerable members of the community who had called national helplines to request assistance in the early days of the pandemic, while more substantive arrangements were established. The FBU refused the request because door knocking wasn't listed as an activity in the tripartite agreement, so the service asked staff to volunteer and, thankfully, enough did to meet the request. This shows the difficulties some chief fire officers faced.

We heard several times that firefighters who volunteered to help weren't able to carry out some activities until the national tripartite agreement had been reached.

All services maintained their ability to respond to fires and other emergencies

As illustrated in figure 1, fire engine availability in many services was high – certainly higher than it was in the same period in 2019. During the first phase of the pandemic, the steps that service incidents planners took to protect firefighters from exposure to the virus seemed to work, with very few absent. This was further helped by the overall number of incidents attended by services falling 5 percent from 1 April to 30 June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019.

Fire engine availability was also boosted by the large numbers of available on-call firefighters. Normally, the availability of on-call crewed engines is lower during the daytime, with on-call firefighters working away from their fire station. However, during the pandemic, with a considerable number of these firefighters furloughed from their primary employment or working from home, the majority of on-call fire engines were available.

Services may not be in the same position during subsequent waves. The availability of on-call firefighters largely returned to normal following the first peak, as many returned to their primary employment. Absence rates may also increase due to self-isolation and higher infection rates, and as those who were furloughed return to work.

We were encouraged to see that services were able to maintain their response to major incidents during the pandemic. In the early summer, hot weather resulted in a significant number of outdoor fires. For example, in May 2020, Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service experienced its largest fire in recent history at Wareham Forest. It was able to deal with the incident with support from a number of services (required due to the scale of the incident), while working within the restrictions of the pandemic. Likewise, Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service responded to several large moorland fires over the same period.

The prioritisation of response was, in some cases, to the detriment of protection and prevention activity

In some instances, the chief fire officer decided to prioritise and/or redeploy staff to respond to emergencies. Protection and prevention activity suffered as a result. Services that paused their risk-based inspection programmes should make sure they have robust plans to make up the backlog.

It may have been sensible for some services to redeploy protection staff to response duties at first. However, some were slow to change their approach when the redeployment was no longer necessary – that is, when there were generally low sickness levels among firefighters and demand fell, albeit slightly. The overall number of incidents attended fell 5 percent from 1 April to 30 June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019.

Not all eight services that paused protection activity, such as risk-based inspection programmes, had a convincing rationale for doing so. We will pay close attention to how services have managed any inspection backlogs in our upcoming round of full inspection in spring 2021.

Access to data on vulnerable individuals from partners varied

Services that had good arrangements in place to give and receive data (including on shielding and other vulnerability factors) to/from local agencies were well placed to identify the most vulnerable individuals in their area and respond accordingly. In some areas, services and their LRF partners combined lists, which gave everyone a more comprehensive view of vulnerability across the community.

While some services benefitted from improved access to data during the pandemic, others were frustrated by a lack of data exchange or provision from other agencies. This lack of consistency across the sector is a concern, as some vulnerable people may not be known to the fire and rescue services.

The oversight and scrutiny of fire and rescue authorities varied

Each service is overseen by a fire and rescue authority, the size and composition of which varies. There are several governance arrangements in place across England, although each authority ultimately has the same function – that is, to set the service's priorities and budget and assure that the budget is spent wisely. The authority is also the employer to whom the chief fire officer and their staff ultimately report. London has slightly different governance arrangements, although responsibility ultimately rests with the Mayor of London.

There was no set approach for how authorities should operate during the pandemic. No governance arrangement appeared to be more effective than another.

Some fire and rescue authorities continued with business as usual, providing the same oversight they usually do. Others delegated functions to the chief fire officer. In doing so, they recognised the critical nature of the pandemic and the need for the chief fire officer to be able to quickly adapt the service's response. Chief fire officers spoke positively about this delegated authority and the sense of operational independence it gave them. We welcome this approach.

In [State of Fire and Rescue 2019](#), we recommended giving chief fire officers operational independence so they have the freedom to determine all operational aspects of their service to meet the risks set out in the authority's integrated risk management plan. Our recommendation stands. The pandemic has shown the value of this demarcation between governance and operational decision making.

Some services were more prepared for the pandemic than others

Pandemic flu is at the top of most organisations' risk registers, so services should have had plans in place to deal with such an event. While most, but not all, services had business continuity and pandemic flu plans in place, understandably few foresaw the entirety of COVID-19 and its implications, so activity was reactive. Plans didn't foresee national lockdowns or the need for social distancing, and most were predicated on large staff absences that, thankfully, didn't materialise during the first wave.

Most, but not all, services evolved their plans to reflect learning and the changing situation. Eleven services didn't have a bespoke pandemic flu plan to begin with, so also hadn't tested or rehearsed it, putting them at an immediate disadvantage. Further waves, and the uncertainty they bring, makes this position of relatively inflexibility and poor preparedness for rapid change concerning.

The fire and rescue sector was able to come together effectively during the pandemic

The role of the NFCC

Those involved with the NFCC's response to the pandemic can be proud of how they facilitated a co-ordinated fire and rescue sector response. The Home Office recently provided additional funding to improve NFCC capacity and capability. However, this only arrived in June and, as the NFCC is a small organisation, it remains very dependent on the goodwill of volunteers, who do fire and rescue sector work in addition to their day jobs. The Home Office and the sector should consider how to further increase its capacity if the pandemic continues to demand support and resources.

We were encouraged to see the NFCC taking a leading role by providing an operational perspective in negotiations with fire and rescue services' employers (represented by the National Employers) and the FBU. We consider it essential that chief fire officers, who are responsible for providing fire and rescue services to the public, can contribute to and influence national discussions on terms and conditions. We were disappointed to see the employers and FBU revert back to NJC negotiations, thereby excluding the NFCC until revised professional risk assessments were required. Including the NFCC would ensure decisions were made in a way that allows fire and rescue services to deploy their staff flexibly to meet public need.

Clear communication channels between the fire and rescue sector and the government, facilitated by the NFCC

We were encouraged to see the sector communicate with central and local government, including the Home Office and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, through a single representative, Roy Wilsher, chair of the NFCC. This aligns with the existing arrangements for responding to major incidents and provides a robust model for the sector in the future.

Phil Garrigan, chief fire officer for Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service, was appointed 'gold officer' to act as the interface between Roy Wilsher and the fire and rescue sector. He joined regular calls with the Home Office. Roy Wilsher chaired a weekly meeting of chief fire officers, at which Phil Garrigan was able to update colleagues and answer questions. Phil Garrigan was also able to make decisions and respond on behalf of the sector to any central government requests.

National guidance on how to fulfil statutory duties during the pandemic

The NFCC produced a wealth of guidance on a range of issues, including prevention, protection and working safely, to help individual services respond to the challenges caused by the pandemic. This helped reduce operational variation between services. Many found the guidance useful, although some felt it could have been issued more quickly. Not all followed it. Overall, though, the council put effective arrangements in place.

Joint procurement

We were particularly impressed that over three-quarters of services used a national procurement hub to jointly procure PPE.

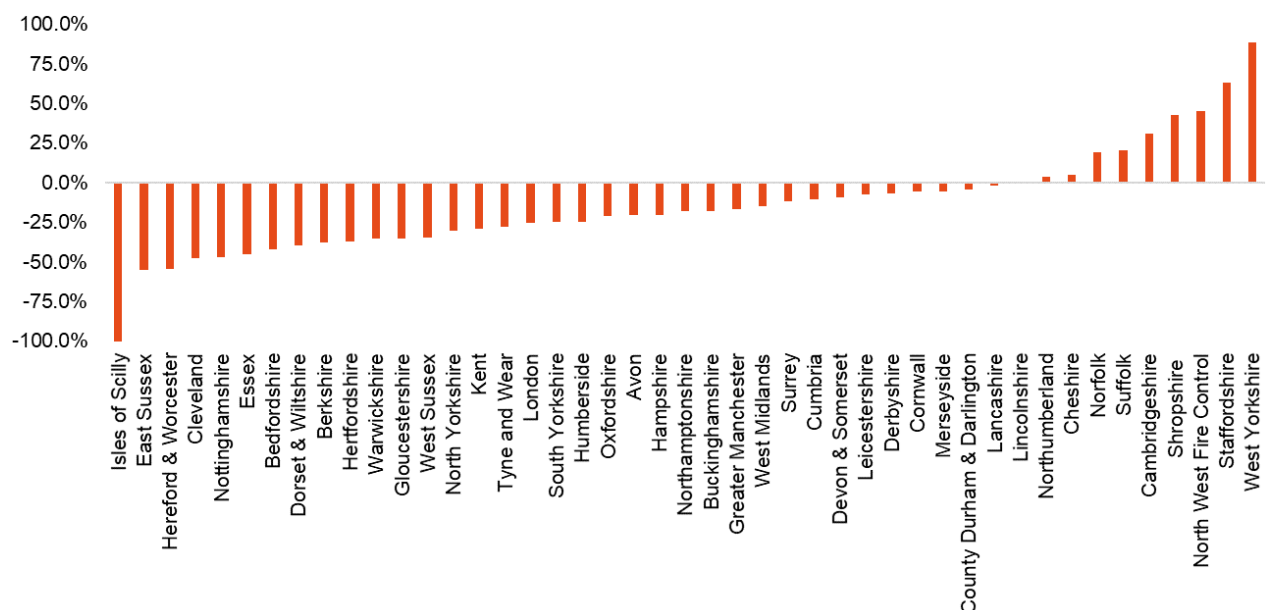
Worldwide demand for PPE outstripped supply at the outset of the pandemic, causing shortages. The fire and rescue sector formed a national procurement hub to give services access to a market with more than 400 suppliers. Individually, they wouldn't have met the minimum order requirements that many demanded.

The services that didn't procure PPE through the hub had arrangements with others – for example, the council county of which they are part – so didn't purchase in isolation.

Sickness

We were provided with data on the number of shifts/days lost due to sickness absence by Cleveland Fire Brigade, which collects it on behalf of every service. Thankfully, this data shows that, across all services, none approached risk-critical absence levels during the first wave of the pandemic, from 1 April 2020 to 30 June 2020. In fact, sickness levels were generally lower than normal. Figure 3 shows the percentage change in days/shifts lost due to sickness when comparing the first three months of the pandemic with the same period in 2019. Only ten services had more staff off sick.

Figure 3: Percentage change in overall sickness absence in the period 1 April to 30 June 2019 compared with 1 April to 30 June 2020 by fire and rescue service



Isles of Scilly Fire and Rescue Service (FRS), Kent FRS and Cambridgeshire FRS didn't provide sickness absence data to the Cleveland Sickness Absence data collection, and instead provided this data direct to HMICFRS.

Continuous improvement

The NFCC commissioned an independent 'lessons learnt' review that was shared across the sector to identify how it can improve, should it face another incident of this nature. This self-reflection is positive and shows a commitment to improve and modernise by the NFCC.

The intent behind the tripartite agreement was pragmatic, but it was too prescriptive in practice

The tripartite agreement covers operational staff, including wholetime firefighters – that is, frontline staff whose terms and conditions, including roles and responsibilities, are specified in the grey book. The agreement was intended to offer a contractually compliant way of expanding the work these staff could do so that services, particularly those with a mainly wholetime workforce, could use them to help support their communities during the pandemic.

As these changes were temporary alterations to contractual terms and conditions, staff had to volunteer to carry out this additional pandemic work. – it wasn't compulsory. Before the agreement was reached, firefighters who were members of the FBU were discouraged from undertaking these additional humanitarian activities.

The agreement should have allowed services to simply refer to a single document before tasking additional pandemic activity to frontline staff. However, at the insistence of the FBU, and after hours, days and sometimes weeks of negotiation, it became too prescriptive. It didn't always enable chief fire officers to use their staff to meet local need in a timely manner. For example, the agreement to deliver food to the most vulnerable didn't extend to firefighters carrying out wellbeing checks.

In addition, each specific activity needed a new risk assessment or statement, even for roles that were similar to those that had been previously agreed. For example, separate agreements were required for firefighters driving ambulances on blue lights and not on blue lights.

The activities listed in the tripartite agreement, which had 15 iterations, were unnecessarily detailed.

There is now an unhelpful precedent of national bodies such as the FBU being able to specify the terms on which service leaders deploy large swathes of their workforce during a national emergency. We made a recommendation for operational independence to be given to chief fire officers in [State of Fire and Rescue 2019](#) and this remains pressing.

In December 2020, the NFCC was removed from the tripartite agreement, which then became an agreement between the National Employers and the FBU. On 13 January 2021, this agreement collapsed. While negotiating a further agreement for firefighters to support the national vaccination programme, the FBU placed restrictions on

firefighters that were unsustainable, so the National Employers couldn't support them. This shows the unworkable nature of such an approach.

In November 2020, we commissioned YouGov to [survey public perceptions of local fire and rescue services across England](#). The majority of respondents supported the idea that fire and rescue services use additional capacity to assist other emergency services with:

- driving ambulances and undertaking training to do so (60 percent);
- supporting vulnerable people with food packages and essential items (57 percent);
- delivering PPE and medical supplies to the NHS and care facilities (56 percent); and
- delivering and distributing vaccines (56 percent).

Many services deployed staff who weren't bound by the tripartite agreement – that is, those whose terms and conditions aren't in the grey book – to get around its restrictions. For example, UNISON agreed general principles for its members (typically non-operational staff), supporting their involvement where necessary and where it was for the good of their communities. Risk assessments were carried out locally and UNISON became involved at a national level only if issues arose.

That an agreement was needed for operational staff at all reflects poorly on the existing arrangements for negotiating terms and conditions in the sector and, consequently, services' ability to use their staff as required during a global public health emergency. It has created an unhelpful precedent for future negotiations about the role of the firefighter. For example, Greater Manchester FRS was asked in September 2020 for its assistance with the COVID-19 test and trace programme in the local area. To its credit, the service confirmed it had the capacity to help and deployed non-operational staff with immediate effect. Separately, the same month, the NFCC requested for this activity to be added to the tripartite agreement. However, delays caused by the tripartite process, including the additional work required for individual risk assessments related to other activities, meant wholetime firefighters didn't start until December 2020.

On-call firefighters further demonstrated their enormous value to fire and rescue services

On-call firefighter availability was high during the pandemic. Many services relied on them and their flexibility to provide important additional activity, both within and outside the tripartite agreement, including:

- driving ambulances;
- packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people; and
- delivering PPE and other medical supplies.

During our first round of inspections in 2018, we found that on-call firefighters are often not seen as equal to their wholetime counterparts. However, the range of activities they were able to carry out during the first wave of the pandemic clearly reflects their strong community spirit. Their willingness to take on additional activity –

such as movement of the bodies of the deceased and covering wholetime absences – is testament to their skills and dedication to the role in challenging circumstances.

Services could have done more to ensure the efficient and productive use of their staff

Wholetime firefighters were often confined to their station to ensure enough firefighters were available to respond to emergencies. However, many were underutilised, as there were:

- fewer incidents to attend (albeit only slightly fewer – see below);
- fewer training opportunities;
- less community engagement; and
- less prevention/protection work.

The digital transformation non-operational staff experienced during the pandemic wasn't always shared by those working on fire stations.

Around half of all services decided not to use their wholetime firefighters to conduct activity that was additional to emergency response. The majority of these firefighters stopped all engagement work with the public. This was done to reduce their risk of contracting the virus and, thereby maintain the resilience of services' response functions. This meant that wholetime firefighters in these services were primarily only responding to emergencies as well as taking on a small number of additional activities. The overall number of incidents attended fell 5 percent from 1 April to 30 June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019.

It was clearly important for services to make sure they had enough members of staff available to respond to emergencies. At the onset of the pandemic, when no one knew what the absence rates would be, ensuring their availability was sensible. But some services were slow to change activity rotas to more effectively deploy their staff when the full impact was known.

Most services put effective measures in place to protect control room functions

Services need to be able to respond to calls for help from the public. The control room is the first and often only contact the public have with them. It is vital to the effective running of a fire and rescue service.

All services put in place measures to make sure their control room could continue to operate throughout the pandemic. Some of these measures were pre-planned and part of existing degradation and pandemic flu plans. Others were ad hoc and reactive. Measures included:

- training additional staff to provide resilience;
- implementing enhanced cleaning and hygiene standards; and
- isolating the control room from the wider workforce.

Every service has arrangements in place with other services to handle calls on their behalf should the need arise.

Services should consider how effective, resilient and robust these arrangements are, and make sure plans are in place and kept up to date. The possibility of firefighters and staff having to self-isolate while waiting for and following a positive test result is a real risk. If this risk isn't mitigated, considering the length of time it can take to train control room staff, the effect on services could be substantial.

More could have been done by services to consider if their risk profile changed as a result of the pandemic

Some services hadn't done anything to consider if COVID-19 had changed the risk in their area and required them to change or re-prioritise activity. For example:

- different groups of people who may be at greater risk of fire; or
- risk in particular buildings, especially if their use had altered during the pandemic, whether they were repurposed or otherwise.

Services that reconsidered their risk profile were of the view that those who were vulnerable to COVID-19 and its effects were often the groups most vulnerable to fire and associated risks, so didn't feel it necessary to make any adjustments. But this may not be the case everywhere. It should have been something each service considered.

The NFCC is currently leading work, through its community risk programme, to help services identify and manage higher-risk people and buildings. We look forward to seeing how the lessons learnt during the pandemic contribute to that work.

The additional costs services incurred when responding to the pandemic were mainly covered by government grants

Services incurred additional costs during the pandemic – some modest, others considerable. The biggest additional costs for most were overtime and PPE. The majority of services used their collective bargaining power to purchase PPE through a national procurement hub. This is encouraging and shows good commercial practice.

Nearly all the incurred costs were covered by government financial support. As a result, services didn't need to spend their reserves. A small number used some of their reserve to cover a shortfall while waiting for their grant. County council services were reimbursed for what they spent during the pandemic, so didn't have the same autonomy in how the grant was spent.

Services anticipate significant budget shortfalls in future years as business rates fall in response to the economic downturn. Many, but not all, services have retained some of their unspent grant money to cover some of this anticipated shortfall. We are pleased to see this prudent approach. Not all services have shown such forward-thinking.

Wellbeing provision offered to staff during COVID-19 was good but varied

We found that most services offer a good, comprehensive wellbeing service to their staff. The vast majority of respondents to our staff survey agreed that they were able to access services to support their mental wellbeing when appropriate. (Note that wellbeing provision differs across services – more detail of this variation can be found in figure 4.)

Some services were quick to expand their wellbeing provision during the pandemic. Work is underway in most services to consider the long-term effects of COVID-19 on staff wellbeing.

Two-thirds of services identified staff who might be vulnerable to the virus. This included black and ethnic minority staff, who are disproportionately affected by the virus and those living with shielding factors. Additional support was offered to these staff members, where appropriate. It is incumbent on services to talk to all their staff to identify risks and provide appropriate support, especially as some staff may be reluctant to disclose this information voluntarily.

Kent FRS developed a COVID-19 risk estimator for all staff. They were asked to enter their personal data (including age, general health condition, ethnicity and gender) on a screening matrix. The risk score was cross-referenced to an individual's role and the risk they/it carried of contracting COVID-19. High-scoring members of staff had access to a tailored support programme that was also used to determine when they should return to the workplace. This risk tool was shared with the NFCC and subsequently adopted by other services.

Wellbeing could have been better targeted at those most at risk in a third of services. Some services didn't approach staff to identify if they needed support. Others didn't tailor any wellbeing services to those working in COVID-19 high-risk roles.

This reactive rather than proactive approach meant that those who needed additional support may not have been helped in the most appropriate way. Relying on staff to self-identify as needing support creates a risk. Guidance from [Public Health England](#) says some people may not be prepared to disclose their individual circumstances. It is incumbent on services to talk to all their staff to identify risks and provide appropriate support.

Figure 4: Which wellbeing services fire and rescue services tailored for staff members who met government requirements for the high-risk shielded patients list

Fire and rescue service	Occupational health	Specialist counselling and support	Peer support	External support services	Other
Avon	✓				
Bedfordshire					
Buckinghamshire	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Cambridgeshire	✓				✓
Cheshire					✓
Cleveland					
Cornwall			✓		
County Durham and Darlington	✓		✓		
Cumbria	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Derbyshire	✓		✓	✓	✓
Devon & Somerset					✓
Dorset & Wiltshire	✓	✓	✓	✓	
East Sussex	✓	✓	✓		
Essex	✓	✓	✓		✓
Gloucestershire	✓		✓	✓	
Greater Manchester					✓
Hampshire and the Isle of Wight	✓			✓	

Fire and rescue service	Occupational health	Specialist counselling and support	Peer support	External support services	Other
Hereford & Worcester	✓	✓			
Hertfordshire	✓	✓			
Humberside	✓		✓		
Isles of Scilly					
Kent					✓
Lancashire	✓				✓
Leicestershire	✓	✓		✓	✓
Lincolnshire	✓	✓	✓		
London	✓	✓	✓		
Merseyside	✓	✓		✓	
Norfolk	✓				
North Yorkshire	✓		✓		
Northamptonshire	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northumberland					✓
Nottinghamshire	✓				
Oxfordshire			✓		✓
Royal Berkshire	✓		✓	✓	✓
Shropshire	✓	✓	✓	✓	
South Yorkshire	✓		✓		

Fire and rescue service	Occupational health	Specialist counselling and support	Peer support	External support services	Other
Staffordshire	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Suffolk			✓		
Surrey	✓				✓
Tyne and Wear	✓		✓		
Warwickshire	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
West Midlands	✓	✓	✓		
West Sussex			✓		
West Yorkshire					

Annex A: About the data

The data in this report is from a range of sources, including from:

- all 45 fire and rescue services (FRSs) in England;
- the Home Office;
- the NFCC;
- a public perceptions survey conducted by YouGov; and
- our COVID-19 edition of the FRS staff survey.

For more information on the methodology for regular data collection from fire and rescue services please see the about data section of our website and the Home Office fire statistics guidance.

Unless otherwise specified, the data in this report covers two distinct periods from 1 April to 30 June 2019 (for comparison) and 1 April to 30 June 2020 (during the pandemic).

Percentage change in engine availability

An engine is deemed unavailable if there aren't enough staff or skills (for example, a driver competent to ride incident commander) for it to attend an incident.

Percentage change in sickness absence

Sickness absence data is collected by Cleveland Fire Brigade for the National Occupational Health Report for FRSs.

Services give data as days/shifts lost due to sickness, and include both long-term and short-term sickness.

COVID-19 sickness is only included in the data when a staff member is showing symptoms of COVID-19 or when a staff member is confirmed COVID-19 positive. Self-isolation owing to household members displaying Covid-19 symptoms or high-risk staff members shielding aren't included in the sickness absence figures.

Public perceptions survey, YouGov

We commissioned YouGov to undertake a survey of the public's perceptions of local FRSs across England as part of their GB and UK Omnibus survey.

Fieldwork took place online between 27 and 29 November 2020. There were 1,908 respondents from England and the figures have been weighted and are representative of all adults (aged 18+) in Great Britain.

Staff survey

We conducted a COVID-19 edition of the FRS staff survey, which was open to all members of FRS workforces across England. We received 7,768 responses between 12 August and 9 September 2020.

The results don't necessarily represent the opinions and attitudes of a service's whole workforce. The survey sample was self-selecting, and the response rate ranged from 6 percent to 48 percent of a service's workforce. Any findings should be considered alongside the service's overall response rate (see figure 5).

The results from the staff survey are only to be used as an indicative measure of service performance.

The percentage of workforce was calculated using the number of responses received and Home Office fire statistics on workforce: Total staff numbers (full time equivalent) by role and fire and rescue authority by headcount.

Figure 5: Staff survey responses by fire and rescue service

Fire and rescue service	Number of responses	Percentage of workforce
Avon	106	12%
Bedfordshire	146	24%
Buckinghamshire	30	6%
Cambridgeshire	210	36%
Cheshire	214	25%
Cleveland	114	20%
Cornwall	99	13%
County Durham & Darlington	41	7%
Cumbria	185	28%
Derbyshire	134	15%
Devon & Somerset	277	13%
Dorset & Wiltshire	167	12%
East Sussex	107	13%

Fire and rescue service	Number of responses	Percentage of workforce
Essex	191	13%
Gloucestershire	115	24%
Greater London	975	17%
Greater Manchester	173	10%
Hampshire	253	15%
Hereford & Worcester	121	17%
Hertfordshire	115	13%
Humberside	199	19%
Isle of Wight	31	16%
Isles of Scilly	19	48%
Kent	399	25%
Lancashire	108	8%
Leicestershire	219	31%
Lincolnshire	134	20%
Merseyside	175	15%
Norfolk	154	17%
North Yorkshire	75	10%
Northamptonshire	103	18%
Northumberland	59	18%
Nottinghamshire	182	22%
Oxfordshire	121	18%
Royal Berkshire	256	39%

Fire and rescue service	Number of responses	Percentage of workforce
Shropshire	177	29%
South Yorkshire	210	24%
Staffordshire	62	7%
Suffolk	210	30%
Surrey	164	21%
Tyne and Wear	333	39%
Warwickshire	120	24%
West Midlands	129	7%
West Sussex	143	20%
West Yorkshire	213	15%

Annex B: The tripartite agreement activities carried out by services

Additional pandemic activities listed under the tripartite agreement

1. Ambulance driving
2. Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
3. Movement of bodies of the deceased
4. Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff
5. Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
6. Taking samples for COVID-19 antigen testing
7. Driving ambulances, not on blue lights (excluding COVID-19 patients) to outpatient appointments or to receive urgent care
8. Training for non-service personnel to drive ambulances (not on blue lights)
9. Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people
10. Transferring known or suspected COVID-19 patients to and from Nightingale hospitals
11. Transferring patients, including those recovering and recuperating from but no longer infected with COVID-19 to and from Nightingale hospitals
12. Delivering infection, prevention and control training packages for care homes.

Tripartite agreement activities carried out by fire and rescue services as at 17 September 2020.

It is important to note that in many cases the service wasn't asked by local partners to provide the listed activity. Details of the activity would be provided only if requested.

Fire and rescue service	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Avon	✓						✓					✓
Bedfordshire												
Buckinghamshire	✓	✓										✓
Cambridgeshire	✓			✓				✓				

Fire and rescue service	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Cheshire		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓			
Cleveland		✓			✓							✓
Cornwall	✓	✓		✓	✓				✓			
County Durham and Darlington		✓			✓							
Cumbria		✓		✓	✓				✓			
Derbyshire		✓		✓	✓		✓		✓			
Devon & Somerset	✓			✓								
Dorset & Wiltshire	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓			
East Sussex					✓							
Essex	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓			
Gloucestershire	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓			✓
Greater Manchester			✓	✓	✓							
Hampshire and the Isle of Wight	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓
Hereford & Worcester				✓	✓							
Hertfordshire	✓	✓										
Humberside	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Isles of Scilly			✓									
Kent	✓	✓		✓	✓							✓
Lancashire		✓		✓	✓	✓			✓			
Leicestershire		✓		✓	✓		✓					
Lincolnshire	✓	✓					✓					

Fire and rescue service	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
London	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓			
Merseyside		✓	✓	✓	✓				✓			
Norfolk	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓				✓
North Yorkshire	✓	✓			✓				✓			
Northamptonshire		✓	✓				✓		✓			
Northumberland		✓	✓		✓				✓			✓
Nottinghamshire		✓			✓		✓		✓			
Oxfordshire	✓			✓								
Royal Berkshire												
Shropshire				✓	✓							
South Yorkshire		✓		✓	✓				✓			
Staffordshire		✓			✓							
Suffolk	✓	✓			✓				✓			
Surrey	✓	✓	✓		✓							
Tyne and Wear		✓	✓		✓				✓			
Warwickshire		✓			✓				✓			
West Midlands		✓	✓	✓	✓				✓			
West Sussex		✓			✓							
West Yorkshire		✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓

Tripartite activities carried out by services as at 17 September 2020

Avon

- Ambulance driving
- Driving ambulances, not on blue lights (excluding COVID-19 patients) to outpatient appointments or to receive urgent care
- Delivering infection, prevention and control training packages for care homes.

Bedfordshire

None.

Buckinghamshire

- Ambulance driving
- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Delivering infection, prevention and control training packages for care homes.

Cambridgeshire

- Ambulance driving
- Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff
- Training for non-service personnel to drive ambulances (not on blue lights).

Cheshire

- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Movement of bodies of the deceased
- Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Taking samples for COVID-19 antigen testing
- Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people.

Cleveland

- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Delivering infection, prevention and control training packages for care homes.

Cornwall

- Ambulance driving
- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people.

County Durham and Darlington

- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities.

Cumbria

- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people.

Derbyshire

- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Driving ambulances, not on blue lights (excluding COVID-19 patients) to outpatient appointments or to receive urgent care
- Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people.

Devon & Somerset

- Ambulance driving
- Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff.

Dorset & Wiltshire

- Ambulance driving
- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Movement of bodies of the deceased
- Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff
- Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people.

East Sussex

- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities.

Essex

- Ambulance driving
- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Movement of bodies of the deceased
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Training for non-service personnel to drive ambulances (not on blue lights)
- Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people.

Gloucestershire

- Ambulance driving

- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Movement of bodies of the deceased
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Taking samples for COVID-19 antigen testing
- Training for non-service personnel to drive ambulances (not on blue lights)
- Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people
- Delivering infection, prevention and control training packages for care homes.

Greater Manchester

- Movement of bodies of the deceased
- Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities.

Hampshire and the Isle of Wight

- Ambulance driving
- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Movement of bodies of the deceased
- Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Taking samples for COVID-19 antigen testing
- Training for non-service personnel to drive ambulances (not on blue lights)
- Transferring patients, including those recovering and recuperating from but no longer infected with COVID-19 to and from Nightingale hospitals
- Delivering infection, prevention and control training packages for care homes.

Hereford & Worcester

- Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities.

Hertfordshire

- Ambulance driving
- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons.

Humberside

- Ambulance driving
- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Movement of bodies of the deceased
- Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Driving ambulances, not on blue lights (excluding COVID-19 patients) to outpatient appointments or to receive urgent care

- Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people
- Transferring known or suspected COVID-19 patients to and from Nightingale hospitals
- Transferring patients, including those recovering and recuperating from but no longer infected with COVID-19 to and from Nightingale hospitals
- Delivering infection, prevention and control training packages for care homes.

Isles of Scilly

- Movement of bodies of the deceased.

Kent

- Ambulance driving
- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Delivering infection, prevention and control training packages for care homes.

Lancashire

- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Taking samples for COVID-19 antigen testing
- Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people.

Leicestershire

- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Driving ambulances, not on blue lights (excluding COVID-19 patients) to outpatient appointments or to receive urgent care.

Lincolnshire

- Ambulance driving
- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Driving ambulances, not on blue lights (excluding COVID-19 patients) to outpatient appointments or to receive urgent care.

London

- Ambulance driving
- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Movement of bodies of the deceased
- Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff

- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people.

Merseyside

- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Movement of bodies of the deceased
- Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people.

Norfolk

- Ambulance driving
- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Movement of bodies of the deceased
- Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Driving ambulances, not on blue lights (excluding COVID-19 patients) to outpatient appointments or to receive urgent care
- Training for non-service personnel to drive ambulances (not on blue lights)
- Delivering infection, prevention and control training packages for care homes.

North Yorkshire

- Ambulance driving
- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people.

Northamptonshire

- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Movement of bodies of the deceased
- Driving ambulances, not on blue lights (excluding COVID-19 patients) to outpatient appointments or to receive urgent care
- Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people.

Northumberland

- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Movement of bodies of the deceased
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people
- Delivering infection, prevention and control training packages for care homes.

Nottinghamshire

- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Driving ambulances, not on blue lights (excluding COVID-19 patients) to outpatient appointments or to receive urgent care
- Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people.

Oxfordshire

- Ambulance driving
- Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff.

Royal Berkshire

None.

Shropshire

- Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities.

South Yorkshire

- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people.

Staffordshire

- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities.

Suffolk

- Ambulance driving
- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people.

Surrey

- Ambulance driving
- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Movement of bodies of the deceased
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities.

Tyne and Wear

- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Movement of bodies of the deceased
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people.

Warwickshire

- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people.

West Midlands

- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Movement of bodies of the deceased
- Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people.

West Sussex

- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities.

West Yorkshire

- Delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons
- Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Taking samples for COVID-19 antigen testing
- Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people
- Transferring known or suspected COVID-19 patients to and from Nightingale hospitals
- Transferring patients, including those recovering and recuperating from but no longer infected with COVID-19 to and from Nightingale hospitals
- Delivering infection, prevention and control training packages for care homes.

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