

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**

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