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Chief Fire Officer
Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor David Norman MBE
Cabinet Member for Public Protection, Parking and Libraries
Gloucestershire County Council

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Bowcock and Cllr Norman,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: GLOUCESTERSHIRE 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 9 and 20 November 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

5. In relation to your service, the strategic co-ordination group (SCG) of the Gloucestershire Local Resilience Forum (LRF) declared a major incident on 24 March 2020.

6. In summary, the service adapted well during the first phase of the pandemic. It continued to provide its core statutory functions and gave additional support to partners and the wider community. It managed its resources effectively and maintained its ability to respond to

emergencies. It concentrated its home and building safety work on those most at risk and introduced innovations such as remote assessments and desktop audits to limit face-to-face contact. This meant the service supported the people of Gloucestershire well during the pandemic and helped limit the spread of the virus.

7. Notably, the service quickly reviewed priorities and redeployed resources to create capacity. It provided staff and premises to assist with the pandemic response. Firefighters drove ambulances, delivered personal protective equipment (PPE) and medical supplies to NHS sites, moved the deceased, and delivered essential items to vulnerable people. Fire stations were used to base ambulances and for PPE storage and distribution. Some of this support has continued throughout the pandemic, and firefighters have recently resumed driving ambulances.

8. The service took extra steps to support the wellbeing of its staff. It provided additional wellbeing support and worked with staff, including black, Asian and minority ethnic staff associations, to tailor this support for those who were at a higher risk from COVID-19. It brought forward plans to update IT equipment which enabled agile working and improved communication. Making service information and systems available online to staff using their personal IT helped support remote working.

9. We recognise that the arrangements for managing the pandemic may carry on for some time, and that the service is now planning for the future. In order to be as efficient and effective as possible, Gloucestershire FRS should focus on the following areas:

(a) It should determine how it will adopt for the longer-term, the new and innovative ways of working introduced during the pandemic, to secure lasting improvements.

(b) It should consider its pandemic flu planning arrangements and whether its current plans are comprehensive enough to meet the specific needs of the service and its community. If not, the service should make sure the plans change to reflect these needs.

Preparing for the pandemic

10. In line with good governance, the service had business continuity plans in place. The service is a member of the Gloucestershire LRF, which has an overarching plan covering how partners will work together during a flu pandemic. However, it did not have a service-specific pandemic flu plan. It activated some of its business continuity plans.

11. The plans were detailed enough to enable the service to make an effective initial response, but understandably, they didn't anticipate and mitigate all the risks presented by COVID-19.

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

13. The plans now include further detail on what elements of the service should maintain response capability if staff sickness absence is greater than normal. These are the degradation

arrangements. They cover response, control and incident commanders. There is additional guidance that covers station cleaning, COVID-safe training, remote working and provision of COVID-specific PPE.

Fulfilling statutory functions

14. The main functions of a fire and rescue service are firefighting, promoting fire safety through prevention and protection (making sure building owners comply with fire safety legislation), rescuing people in road traffic collisions, and responding to emergencies.

15. The service has continued to provide 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. It has introduced new ways of working so it can maintain home safety visits to particularly vulnerable people and check safety standards in its highest risk buildings. It has used remote building assessments and virtual home safety visits, which has limited the amount of face-to-face contact staff need to have with the public.

Response

16. The service told us that between 1 April and 30 June 2020 it attended fewer incidents than it did during the same period in 2019.

17. 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 93.9 percent compared with 89.0 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 due to them being furloughed from their primary employment. The service didn't need to 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.

19. The service had good arrangements in place to make sure that its control room had enough staff during the pandemic. These included effective resilience measures, such as training more staff for control room roles and using a control room at a different location to reduce the chance of staff being infected.

Prevention

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

21. During the pandemic, to reduce direct contact between members of the public and staff to help limit the spread of the virus, the service conducted fewer safe and well visits than it would

normally undertake. Face-to-face safe and well visits were still provided to those at greatest risk from fire on a risk-assessed basis. Staff were provided suitable PPE when completing these.

22. To continue to provide prevention advice, the service introduced the option of a safe and well visit by telephone. It also introduced other options including a triage call to decide if a face-to-face visit was needed, telephone and written safety messages for those assessed as not requiring an immediate visit, and no-contact delivery of smoke detectors.

23. It reviewed which individuals and groups it considered to be at an increased risk from fire as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, where it was not already aware of them, the service added people from Gloucestershire County Council's COVID-19 shielding list to its programme for safe and well visits.

Protection

24. The NFCC issued guidance on how to continue protection activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included maintaining a risk-based approach, completing desktop audits and issuing enforcement notices electronically. The service broadly adopted this guidance.

25. The service reviewed how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic. As a result, it added hotels used to accommodate the homeless, distilleries producing alcohol for hand sanitiser, and pop-up sites used to store COVID-related PPE supplies as being at an increased risk from fire. It engaged with building managers, provided written and face-to-face safety advice, and undertook hazard checks to make sure high-risk buildings were safe.

26. The service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it would normally undertake. It decided to continue face-to-face fire safety audits and was able to provide staff with suitable PPE to make this safe. It introduced risk-based desktop appraisals as an alternative to face-to-face audits, this minimised face-to-face contact between members of staff and the public.

27. The service maintained its capability to issue alteration notices, enforcement notices and prohibition notices, although none of the buildings the service assessed required a notice to be issued. It continued to respond to statutory building control consultations.

28. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as using telephone and/or email to make the initial contact, completing more desktop assessments, and making better information available on its website.

Staff health and safety and wellbeing

29. Staff wellbeing was a clear priority for the service during the pandemic. It proactively identified wellbeing problems and responded to any concerns and further needs. Senior leaders actively promoted wellbeing services and encouraged staff to discuss any worries they had.

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, peer support, and access to external resources such as the service's employee assistance programme.

31. Staff most at risk from COVID-19 were identified effectively, including those from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background and those with underlying health problems. The service used a health questionnaire and assessed a number of risk factors to determine the likelihood of catching COVID-19. The service worked with staff to develop and implement processes to manage the risk. Occupational health assessments were completed for higher-risk staff. The service worked with staff to put in place alternative working arrangements, including allowing support staff to work from home.

32. Wellbeing best practice was also shared with other services. 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 ensured that firefighters were competent to do their work during the pandemic. This included keeping up to date with most 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 appropriate PPE on time. It participated in the national fire sector scheme to procure PPE and also used procurement arrangements put in place by Gloucestershire County Council. These arrangements allowed it to achieve value for money.

Staff absence

36. Absences have decreased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of days/shifts lost due to sickness absence decreased by 35 percent between 1 April and 30 June 2020 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 reporting sickness, recording COVID-related absences, self-isolation and how to access testing. Data was routinely collected on the number of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

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 online team meetings, 'vlogs' by the chief fire officer and senior managers, discussions with managers, and weekly email updates for staff about wellbeing and health and safety.

39. Most on-call firefighter survey respondents told us that they received more communication than usual during the pandemic. The service made use of messaging services, email, social media, virtual meetings and telephone when communicating with on-call staff during the pandemic.

40. The service intends to maintain changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19, including remote working, online meetings and communications, and virtual one-to-one meetings.

Working with others, and making changes locally

41. To protect communities, fire and rescue service staff were asked to volunteer for extra roles beyond their core duties. This was to support other local blue light services and other public service providers that were experiencing high levels of demand, and to offer other support to its communities. The service carried out the following new activities:

- (a) ambulance driving;
- (b) movement of the deceased;
- (c) packaging and delivering food for vulnerable people;
- (d) delivering PPE and medical supplies to the NHS and care facilities;
- (e) infection prevention and control training for care homes; and
- (f) taking samples for COVID antigen testing.

42. A national 'tripartite agreement' was put in place to include the new activities that firefighters could carry out during the pandemic. The agreement was between the NFCC, National Employers, and the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), and specifies what new roles firefighters could provide during the pandemic. Each service then consulted locally on the specific work it had been asked to support, to agree how to address any health and safety requirements including risk assessments. If public sector partners requested further support outside the tripartite agreement, the specifics would need to be agreed nationally before the work could begin.

43. The service consulted locally to implement the tripartite agreement with the FBU and the Fire and Rescue Service Association.

44. Other unions were engaged, including UNISON, Unite and the GMB, as volunteers from non-operational and support staff were considered for extra work, including under the tripartite agreement.

45. All of the new work done by the service under the tripartite agreement was agreed on time for it to start promptly and in line with the request from the partner agency.

46. There were extra requests for work by partner agencies that fell outside the tripartite agreement, including:

- (a) assisting with mobile COVID testing;
- (b) supporting NHS with serology (antibody testing) and swabbing; and

(c) delivering laptops for the education department.

47. This work was agreed and undertaken on time and in line with the request from the partner agency.

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

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

Local resilience forum

50. 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. Gloucestershire FRS is a member of the Gloucestershire LRF.

51. 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.

52. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the service was a member of the excess deaths, community resilience and testing cells. It helped the SCG to establish a suitable command structure that had resilience for the extended duration of the emergency. The service was able to allocate suitably qualified staff to participate in these groups and support the SCG without affecting its core duties.

Use of resources

53. The service's financial position hasn't yet been significantly affected by the pandemic.

54. The service has made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. Up until the end of October 2020, its main extra expenditure was additional staff-related costs of £263,400, and PPE and cleaning costs of £74,800. 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.

55. Up until the end of October 2020, the service forecast that its total extra costs, unachieved savings and reduced income resulting from COVID-19 would be £332,500. Gloucestershire County Council has agreed to balance the service's budget at the end of 2020/21 to take account of this additional pressure. This will be met from the Government's COVID-19 grant. The additional funding will be used to offset losses from unachieved savings and reduced income, along with additional staffing costs, PPE and cleaning buildings. The service has shown how it intends to use this income efficiently, and that it has mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period.

56. The service didn't need to apply to Gloucestershire County Council to access reserves during this time.

57. When used, overtime was managed appropriately. The service's operational resilience team monitored additional duties and work requests so it could make sure staff didn't work for extended periods.

Ways of working

58. The service changed how it operates during the pandemic. For example, it made good use of technology. Communication with staff improved, including regular online updates for the whole service and vlogs by the chief fire officer and senior leaders. Wherever possible, staff worked remotely, and systems were updated so they could be accessed using personal computers and devices. The service had the necessary IT to support remote working where appropriate. Virtual meeting technology was used for service, department and team meetings. Where new IT equipment was needed, it made sure that procurement processes achieved good value for money.

59. The service quickly implemented changes to how it operates. This allowed its staff to work flexibly and efficiently during the pandemic. The service plans to consider how to adapt its flexible working arrangements to make sure it has the right provisions in place to support a modern workforce.

60. The service has had positive feedback from staff on how they were engaged with during the pandemic. As a result, the service plans to adopt these changes into its usual procedures and consider how they can be developed further to help promote a sustainable change to its working culture.

61. 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

62. 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.

63. 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 created and reassigned to support other areas of the service and other organisations.

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

65. The on-call workforce took on extra responsibilities covering most of the roles agreed as part of the tripartite agreement, as well as undertaking other work including moving the deceased

and taking samples for COVID antigen testing. No members of non-operational or support staff undertook additional activities. The service did discuss this with all staff, but it felt the additional work was better suited to the availability and skills of wholetime and on-call firefighters.

Governance of the service's response

66. 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.

67. The service is overseen by Gloucestershire County Council with a council member given lead responsibility for the service. The cabinet lead and the service maintained a constructive relationship during the pandemic. The service regularly updated the lead about how it was responding to the pandemic, and the extra activities of its staff. This included work carried out as part of the tripartite agreement.

68. The cabinet lead 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. There were weekly phone and virtual briefings between the cabinet lead and the chief fire officer. Additional scrutiny was provided by the Council's COVID gold group and chief executive.

Looking to the future

69. 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.

70. Gloucestershire FRS has made good use of technology and agile working during the COVID-19 pandemic. It recognises that online communication and virtual meetings have allowed it to improve and extend the reach of its workforce engagement, particularly to on-call firefighters in remote areas. It plans to continue this approach and consolidate the efficiencies that flexible and remote working offer.

71. During the first phase of the pandemic, firefighters drove ambulances for South West Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust. The service has continued to work with the trust and firefighters have recently resumed driving ambulances as part of the response to the second phase of the pandemic.

72. The service introduced a triage process for its domestic safe and well visits, and a risk-based desktop audit approach for building safety. It plans to continue the triage process and use a mix of desktop and physical audits to improve the effectiveness of its prevention and protection work.

73. Good practice and what worked was shared with other services directly and through the NFCC. This includes procedures for the movement of the deceased, information about infection prevention and control training, and an alternative procedure for firefighter medicals.

74. The service actively collaborated with other fire and rescue services in the south west. This included regular meetings between chief fire officers to exchange learning from the pandemic. Services shared good practice and information, including from their experiences of the initial stage of the pandemic. All services evaluated the activities they undertook in the tripartite agreement and the work they carried out in the community. This allowed them to share information on prevention, protection, response activities and staff wellbeing. Those involved in the collaboration produced a case study detailing the activities of each fire and rescue service, and how each one responded to the initial phase of the pandemic.

Next steps

75. 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,



Wendy Williams

Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary