

**Wendy Williams**

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

Ian Hayton  
Chief Fire Officer  
Cleveland Fire Brigade

Councillor Paul Kirton  
Chair  
Cleveland Fire Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Hayton and Cllr Kirton,

**COVID-19 INSPECTION: CLEVELAND FIRE BRIGADE**

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 brigade's initial response.

4. I am grateful for the positive and constructive way your brigade engaged with our inspection. I am also very grateful to your brigade for the positive contribution you have made to your community during the pandemic. We inspected your brigade between 9 and 20 November 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

5. In relation to your brigade, the Cleveland Local Resilience Forum (LRF) declared a major incident on 20 March 2020.

6. In summary, the brigade adapted and responded to the pandemic effectively by prioritising the health, safety and wellbeing of both its own staff and the community.

7. To maintain its ability to respond to fires and other emergencies, the brigade put in place robust measures to protect staff from infection at fire stations and in its control room. In addition, the brigade developed ways to engage with vulnerable members of the community and businesses alike. Measures the brigade took to maintain prevention and protection activities included the development of online tools and IT to support remote working and to reduce physical contact with the public.

8. The brigade worked directly with local partners and through the LRF to offer support and assistance where requested. This included planning and training to support additional drivers for ambulances and for the mass movement of dead bodies, although, fortunately, neither of these services was required.

9. Staff from across the brigade were involved in the response to COVID-19, with non-operational staff providing an important additional role in supporting the community. On-call firefighters undertook additional duties, including operational support for wholetime colleagues and roles such as ambulance driving, delivering personal protective equipment (PPE) and providing training to care home staff. In addition to providing operational cover, wholetime firefighters assisted with the delivery of essential items to vulnerable people, and with raising awareness of COVID-19 restrictions in the community through leaflet campaigns.

10. The brigade invested in new ways of engaging with staff, using IT and online tools, as well as increasing provision for mental health and advice for financial hardship. These measures helped staff to remain engaged and have access to appropriate wellbeing support where required. The brigade's resources were well managed, and its immediate financial position was mostly unaffected as additional costs were covered by a government grant.

11. We recognise that the arrangements for managing the pandemic may carry on for some time and that the brigade is now planning for the future. To be as efficient and effective as possible, Cleveland Fire Brigade 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 work with all staff to determine how it can identify and address any longer-term impact COVID-19 may have on their wellbeing.

(c) It should make sure wholetime firefighters are fully productive, while minimising the risk of them contracting or spreading the virus.

### **Preparing for the pandemic**

12. In line with good governance, the brigade had a pandemic flu plan and business continuity plans in place, which were in date. These plans were activated.

13. 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.

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

15. The plans now include further detail on what elements of the brigade's work should be maintained when the absence of staff is greater than normal. These are the so-called degradation arrangements. They cover prevention, protection, response and support functions, social distancing, making premises 'COVID-secure', remote working, mutual aid and supply of PPE.

### **Fulfilling statutory functions**

16. 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.

17. The brigade 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 brigade has continued to respond to calls from the public and attended emergencies.

### *Response*

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

19. The overall availability of fire engines was broadly the same during the pandemic as it was during the same period in 2019. Between 1 April and 30 June 2020, the brigade's average overall fire engine availability was 89.3 percent compared with 87.1 percent during the same period in 2019. Availability of on-call firefighters was improved as a result of staff being furloughed from their primary employment.

20. The brigade didn't change its crewing models or shift patterns during this period for wholtime crewed fire engines, but it did introduce a duty crewing system at on-call fire stations. This system reduced the number of staff required to respond to fires and emergencies, to minimise contact between staff, while ensuring that enough staff responded to calls to provide an effective response.

21. The brigade told us that its average response time to fires remained broadly the same during the pandemic compared with the same period in 2019.

22. The brigade had good arrangements in place to make sure that its control room had enough staff during the pandemic.

23. This included effective resilience arrangements, including: use of on-call control staff; re-engaging recently retired staff and deferring a planned retirement; review of fallback

arrangements with other fire and rescue services, and Cleveland Police; and control measures to reduce the risk of infection, such as cleaning, screening and separation.

### *Prevention*

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

25. The brigade conducted fewer home fire safety checks than it would normally undertake. 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, it added people who were lonely and isolated as being at increased risk from fire, and so increased their risk profile to ensure face-to-face visits were carried out where necessary.

26. The brigade decided to continue offering face-to-face home fire safety checks because it could give staff suitable PPE.

27. The brigade introduced the option of a home fire safety check by telephone instead of face to face. It also introduced other options, including the use of an online self-assessment tool and an online portal with video capability to view people's homes remotely, to offer more tailored advice. We welcome this use of technology to keep the public safe.

### *Protection*

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

29. The brigade reviewed how it defines high-risk premises during the pandemic. As a result, it considered some shops and takeaways as being at an increased risk from fire. This was because, in some cases, staff had begun to sleep in them, therefore changing how the premises were being used. It physically inspected such premises where it considered it needed to do so.

30. The brigade conducted fewer fire safety audits than it would normally undertake. It decided to continue face-to-face fire safety audits and enforcement activity on a risk-assessed basis, and provided staff with suitable PPE to do so. It introduced risk-based desktop appraisals as an alternative to face-to-face audits, to minimise face-to-face contact between members of staff and the public.

31. The brigade continued to issue enforcement notices and prohibition notices, but it didn't issue any alteration notices. It also continued responding to statutory building control consultations.

32. 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; sending and receiving still images and/or video electronically; using video conferencing and live streaming; using electronic

documents to replace hard-copy letters; improved information on its website; and reducing the number of staff carrying out visits.

33. The brigade has continued to engage with those responsible for fire safety in high-risk premises with cladding similar to that at Grenfell Tower, in particular, premises where temporary evacuation procedures are in place.

### **Staff health and safety and wellbeing**

34. Staff wellbeing was a clear priority for senior leaders during the pandemic. They actively promoted wellbeing services and encouraged staff to discuss any worries they had.

35. Most staff survey respondents told us that they could access services to support their mental wellbeing if needed. Support put in place for staff included occupational health, counselling, peer support and access to external resources such as COVID-specific mental health training provided by ACAS and State of Mind Sport.

36. Most staff survey respondents told us that where conversations about wellbeing took place with managers, they were useful and relevant, and that wellbeing conversations with line managers took place fortnightly or less. 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 brigade developed and implemented processes working with staff to manage the risk. This included the use of a risk-estimator tool, to help staff and line managers establish what wellbeing support was needed.

37. Wellbeing best practice was also shared with other services. The brigade has discussed with its staff how it should plan for the potential longer-term effects of COVID-19 on its workforce.

38. The brigade made sure that firefighters were competent to do their work during the pandemic. However, this didn't include keeping up to date with most of the firefighter fitness requirements. Measures are now being taken to rectify this.

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

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

### ***Staff absence***

41. Absences have decreased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of shifts lost due to sickness between 1 April and 30 June 2020 decreased by 47.9 percent compared with the same period in 2019. Despite the decrease in sickness absence, the overall absence rate was higher when accounting for numbers of staff who were off work self-isolating at different periods.

42. The brigade updated its 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, shielding and testing. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

### *Staff engagement*

43. Most staff survey respondents told us that the brigade provided regular and relevant communication to all staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included regular virtual team meetings, emails, one-to-ones with a manager, and regular news bulletins about wellbeing and health and safety.

### **Working with others, and making changes locally**

44. To protect communities, fire and rescue service staff were encouraged to carry out extra roles beyond their core duties. This was to support other local blue light services and other public service providers that were experiencing high levels of demand, and to offer other support to its communities.

45. The brigade carried out the following new activities: assisting vulnerable people; face fitting for masks; delivering PPE; packing and repacking food for vulnerable people; providing training packages; and temperature testing members of the public as part of the Middlesbrough Local Outbreak Plan.

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

47. The brigade consulted locally with the FBU to implement the tripartite agreement.

48. Other unions were engaged, including UNISON, if their members were asked to do extra work, including work under the tripartite agreement.

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

50. There were extra requests for work by partner agencies that fell outside the tripartite agreement, including temperature testing on behalf of the local authority. This work was agreed and done on time, in line with the request from the partner agency. But it had to be carried out by support staff, as the service was unable to reach agreement with the FBU to allow them to use wholtime firefighters within the timescales required.

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

52. An extra allowance was not paid to staff who volunteered for new roles. Overtime was paid to staff to cover absences caused by COVID-19.

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

#### *Local resilience forum*

54. 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. Cleveland Fire Brigade is a member of Cleveland LRF.

55. The brigade was an active member of the LRF during the pandemic. The brigade told us that the LRF's arrangements enabled the brigade to fully engage in the multi-agency response.

56. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the brigade was represented at all strategic co-ordinating group meetings and chaired the tactical co-ordinating group. In addition, the brigade was also a member of the following working groups: PPE co-ordination group (including track and trace); Cleveland shielding hub; death management cell; compliance and regulation cell; and communications cell. The brigade was able to allocate suitably qualified staff to participate in these groups without affecting its core duties.

#### **Use of resources**

57. The brigade's financial position hasn't yet been significantly affected by the pandemic.

58. The brigade has made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. Up to 30 June 2020, its main extra costs were £395,000 on staff overtime, £101,000 on PPE and cleaning, and £27,000 on ICT infrastructure. The brigade 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, such as £34,000 on fuel, mileage and subsistence, and has used them to mitigate the financial risks it has identified.

59. At the time of inspection, the brigade received £587,000 of extra government funding to support its response. This was mostly spent on additional staffing costs, PPE and cleaning, ICT, and additional costs associated with delays to work at Stockton Community Fire Station. It has shown how it used this income efficiently and that it mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period.

60. At the time of inspection, the brigade hadn't used any of its reserves to meet the extra costs that arose during this period.

61. Overtime was offered so the service could manage absences. However, this was monitored closely enough by the service or linked to its workforce plan.

#### *Ways of working*

62. The brigade changed the way in which it operates during the pandemic. For example, it: promoted and supported agile and flexible working; amended duty and training systems for on-call staff to minimise contact; improved communications with staff; developed ways of carrying out remote fire safety checks in people's homes; and developed methods for carrying out remote and socially-distanced fire safety audits in business premises. 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.

63. The brigade could quickly implement changes to how it operates. This allowed its staff to work flexibly and efficiently during the pandemic. The brigade 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.

64. The brigade is discussing with on-call firefighters the new ways of working used during the pandemic. These changes should promote efficiency and support better work-life balance for on-call firefighters, by reducing time spent on call while maintaining operational effectiveness.

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

66. The brigade 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.

67. Arrangements put in place to monitor staff performance across the brigade 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 brigade and other organisations.

68. Work under the tripartite agreement was done by both operational and non-operational staff. Operational staff assisted with the delivery of pharmaceutical and essential items. Non-operational staff assisted with the delivery of pharmaceutical and essential items, and temperature testing in the community.

69. The on-call workforce took on extra responsibilities covering some of the roles agreed under the tripartite agreement. They also assisted with the delivery of training packages to care home staff.

70. As part of its workforce planning, the brigade re-engaged retired members of staff to provide support, including operational roles in the control room.

71. The brigade 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**

72. 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 assure that the budget is spent wisely.

73. Members of Cleveland Fire Authority were actively engaged in discussions with the chief fire officer on the brigade's ability to discharge its statutory functions during the pandemic.

74. The brigade regularly updated fire authority members 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 arrangements.

75. During the pandemic, the fire authority maintained some oversight of the brigade, including its decision-making process and was kept informed of decisions it made. The authority reduced its oversight because it recognised the critical nature of this incident, and the need for the chief fire officer to be able to quickly adapt the brigade's response, to effectively support its staff and communities.

### **Looking to the future**

76. 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.

77. Cleveland Fire Brigade has developed good relations with local partners, including the North East Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust. It is looking at ways it can support these organisations beyond the current pandemic. It is also looking at ways to support on-call firefighters' terms and conditions to improve both work-life balance and efficiency and effectiveness. The improved communication and ways of working during the pandemic have helped develop relationships between different parts of the workforce, especially between managers and the representative bodies. The brigade also rapidly developed its use of technology

and is already planning ways to optimise the use of virtual platforms and remote working, to support effective and efficient engagement with staff and the community.

78. Good practice and what worked was shared with other services through the NFCC. This includes risk assessments for carrying out prevention and protection activities, and safe ways to continue delivering this work safely.

### **Next steps**

79. 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 that reads "Wendy Williams". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

### **Wendy Williams**

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