Dear Mr Cashin and Cllr Rudd,

COVID-19 INSPECTION: CHESHIRE 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 21 September and 2 October 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

5. In relation to your service, a major incident was declared on 23 March 2020.
6. In summary, the service has effectively carried out its statutory functions during the pandemic. We were impressed by how the service looked after the welfare of its staff, and the additional support it gave to the community during the first phase of the pandemic. This included:

(a) delivering essential items to vulnerable people;
(b) fitting face masks and delivering personal protective equipment (PPE) for NHS staff and clinical care staff working with COVID-19 patients;
(c) transporting healthcare professionals who were taking pre-operation swab tests;
(d) transporting blood supplies, breast milk and COVID-19 antigen samples; and
(e) offering a safe and secure site for PPE supplies.

7. Non-operational fire staff carried out most of these activities. The service used wholetime firefighters to respond to emergencies. The increased availability of the service’s on-call workforce, together with the re-engagement of several retired firefighters, gave extra resilience where the service needed it.

8. The service benefited from additional government funding. This meant that its financial position was largely unaffected. The service didn’t use reserves to cover extra costs.

9. The service has good processes in place to effectively manage staff health and wellbeing, and to reduce the impact of absence. Throughout the pandemic it has communicated well with its staff, staff networks and representative bodies. This fact has been reflected in all inspection interviews.

10. The service made sure that staff had the resources they needed to do their jobs effectively and safely. It did this by offering additional equipment and new flexible working arrangements.

11. 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, Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service 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 make sure wholetime firefighters are fully productive, while minimising the risk of them contracting or spreading the virus.
(c) It should ensure that appropriate wellbeing and support provisions are in place for those staff identified as at higher risk from COVID-19.
Preparing for the pandemic

12. In line with good governance, the service had a crisis management plan and business continuity plans in place. These were in date. The service also produced a bespoke COVID-19 pandemic plan. For this, it used the learning it had captured in response to the first wave of the pandemic. Some of these plans were activated, specifically in relation to remote working for staff.

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. The service quickly developed and drafted a bespoke plan for COVID-19, to respond to the emerging crisis.

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

15. Plans have been further developed to include 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 service has continued to provide its core statutory functions throughout the pandemic in line with advice from the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC). This means the service has continued to respond to calls from the public and attended emergencies. It has also continued to undertake fire safety prevention and protection work, some remotely, with a particular focus on individuals, organisations and properties with increased risk and vulnerabilities due to the pandemic. Examples include buildings that were repurposed to accommodate hospital requirements and respite care, and hotels being used for asylum seekers.

Response

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

19. The overall availability of fire engines was better during the pandemic than during the same period in 2019. Between 1 April and 30 June 2020, the service’s average overall fire engine availability was 95 percent compared with 82 percent during the same period in 2019. The service told us that this was as a result of high staff availability reflecting the arrangements put in place by the service to limit COVID-19 transmission, and an increased number of on-call firefighters being available to respond to emergencies.

20. The service didn’t change shift patterns during this period. Crewing numbers were kept to a minimum to maintain social distancing wherever possible.
21. The service told us that its average response time to fires improved during the pandemic compared with the same period in 2019. This was due to improved on-call availability, fewer road traffic incidents, which usually have a longer response time, and less traffic on the roads. 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.

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

23. This included effective resilience arrangements, such as adopting a flexible approach to shift cover, modified duties and working from home to reduce the impacts of any absences.

Prevention

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

25. The service conducted fewer home fire safety checks and safe and well visits than normal. The service reviewed which individuals and groups it considered to be at an increased risk from fire as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Out of normal office hours, high risk Home Safety checks from arson or domestic violence referrals continued to be carried out by operational crews in a controlled, risk assessed manner. The service used additional health data to better identify vulnerable members of the community and any localised issues (for example, care homes). It also carried out welfare phone calls to vulnerable or shielding people. The service ran virtual stations open days during which fire prevention campaign messages were communicated to the public.

26. The service decided to continue offering face-to-face home fire safety checks by risk-assessing the need to visit, and giving staff suitable PPE.

27. The service introduced the option of a home fire safety check by telephone instead of face-to-face visits. It also conducted home fire safety checks when non-operational staff carried out visits with NHS staff who were taking pre-operation COVID-19 swab tests to patients.

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. Activity included carrying out audits on those premises that are at the greatest risk from fire. The service adopted this guidance.

29. The service didn’t review how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic. But it did add new premises to those it considered high risk, for example, those that had been repurposed during the pandemic to house hospital patients.

30. The service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it normally would. It decided to continue face-to-face fire safety audits and enforcement work because it could give staff suitable PPE.
It introduced risk-based desktop appraisals instead of face-to-face audits to minimise face-to-face contact between members of staff and the public.

31. The service continued with ongoing enforcement activity. However, the service told us that enforcement activities had reduced. This was because of the desktop approach that it had adopted for the pandemic. It also continued responding to statutory building regulation and planning consultations.

32. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as using telephone and email to make initial contact, completing more desktop assessments and making use of the increased functionality that was available on its IT system. For example, it used web-based applications and a specific business safety questionnaire.

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

34. The service worked with hospital representatives to put in place suitable and reasonable fire safety measures where buildings were repurposed for additional requirements and COVID-19 patient respite care.

Staff health and safety and wellbeing

35. 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.

36. 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 a dedicated mental health practitioner, occupational health, peer support, specialist counselling and mental health advice via the intranet. The service has plans to discuss with staff the potential longer-term effects of COVID-19 on the workforce.

37. The service used staff network groups and managers to identify staff who were most at risk from COVID-19. This included those from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background and/or those who had an underlying health problem. The service worked with staff to develop and implement processes to manage the risk. The service told us that staff in high-risk groups have been encouraged to work from home or to take paid time off work. The service has developed individual risk assessments to highlight COVID-19 risk factors. Line managers address any needs. However, it is unclear whether the service formalised any actions as a result.

38. The service made sure that firefighters were competent to do their work during the pandemic. This included keeping up to date with most of the firefighter fitness requirements.
39. The service assessed the risks of new work to make sure its staff had the skills and equipment needed to work safely and effectively.

40. The service provided its workforce with appropriate PPE in a timely manner. It participated in the national fire sector scheme to procure PPE, which allowed it to achieve value for money.

Staff absence

41. Absences have remained stable compared with the same period in 2019. The number of days/shifts lost due to sickness absence between 1 April and 30 June 2020 increased marginally by 5 percent compared with the same period in 2019. The service put in place measures such as creating bubbles to reduce the risk of transmission between staff.

42. The service intends to launch an updated absence management policy. This will include COVID-related information. It has produced a COVID-19 handbook for managers, so that they can better manage staff wellbeing and health and safety. The handbook includes information about absence, enhanced hygiene routines, social distancing and working arrangements. The service has routinely collected data on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

Staff engagement

43. Most staff survey respondents told us that the service provided regular and relevant communication to all staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included regular virtual team meetings, written correspondence, wellbeing conversations with managers and health and safety bulletins.

44. The service made use of telephone, email, social media, messaging services and virtual meeting platforms when communicating with on-call staff during the COVID-19 pandemic.

45. The service intends to maintain changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19, including the use of additional attendance management processes. These processes will help the service to better understand and support short-term staff absence. The investment of virtual meeting software and associated equipment will also continue to support regular communication among teams. Recently, the service has also carried out a staff survey. This will identify further opportunities to improve.

Working with others, and making changes locally

46. 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.

47. The service carried out the following new activities: delivery of essential items to vulnerable persons; mortuary support; face fitting of masks to be used by NHS/clinical care staff working with
COVID-19 patients; delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS/care facilities; taking samples of COVID-19 antigen testing; and packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people.

48. 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 outside the tripartite agreement, the specifics would need to be agreed nationally before the work could begin.

49. The service consulted locally to implement the tripartite agreement with the FBU and the Fire Officers’ Association.

50. Other unions were engaged, including UNISON, if their members were asked to do additional work outside their normal role.

51. All new 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. Staff volunteered to carry out this work.

52. There were extra requests for work by partner agencies that fell outside the tripartite agreement, including providing a secure site where large quantities of PPE could be stored and accessed 24/7 by all those agencies that needed it. The service also drove nurses so they could administer COVID-19 swab tests to members of the community who were due to have an operation.

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

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

55. The service hasn’t yet fully reviewed and evaluated its activities to support other organisations during this period, and it hasn’t identified which to continue.

Local resilience forum

56. 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 local resilience forum (LRF). Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service is a member of Cheshire LRF.

57. The service was an effective member of the LRF during the pandemic. The service told us that the LRF’s arrangements enabled the service to be fully engaged in the multi-agency response.
58. The assistant chief fire officer is chair of the LRF. In response to COVID-19, the service participated in the following sub-groups: shielding; track and trace; recovery; and excess death. The service also allocated suitably qualified staff to represent it at the strategic and tactical co-ordinating groups. Staff took part in these groups without the service’s core duties being affected.

**Use of resources**

59. The service’s financial position hasn’t yet been significantly affected by COVID-19.

60. The service has made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. Up until 30 June 2020, its main extra costs were:

   (a) £131,000 spent on making sure that it had enough resources available (for example, adopting flexible contracts to re-engage (retired) firefighters);

   (b) £51,000 spent on overtime for wholetime firefighters; and

   (c) £33,000 spent to cover additional costs for on-call firefighters.

61. By 30 June 2020, the service had also spent £228,000 on PPE, cleaning supplies and a staff survey. It had spent £45,000 on ICT, COVID-19 building adaptations and training equipment. The effect of this spending is fully understood in relation to its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings.

62. The service received £960,563 of extra government funding to support its response. It has shown how it used this income, and that it mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period. The service is monitoring, and supervising appropriately, financial activity associated with COVID-19. It holds weekly meetings with the senior management team to understand/review the position.

63. The service didn’t use any of its reserves to meet the extra costs that arose during this period.

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

**Ways of working**

65. The service changed how it operates during the pandemic. For example, it conducted fire authority meetings virtually, provided virtual training activities and procured personal-issue breathing apparatus masks for operational staff. It had the necessary IT to support remote working where appropriate. Additional technology was installed at stations to improve remote working and staff were encouraged to work from home, specifically those in a high-risk group. Where new IT was needed, it made sure that procurement processes achieved good value for money.
66. The service could quickly implement changes to how it operates. This allowed its staff to work flexibly and efficiently during the pandemic.

67. The service has had positive feedback from staff about how it engaged with them during the pandemic. As a result, the service plans to adopt these changes in its usual procedures and consider how it can develop them further to help promote a sustainable change to its working culture.

68. The service made good use of the resources and guidance available from the NFCC to support its workforce planning and help with additional activities in support of partners during the pandemic.

Staffing

69. 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.

70. Arrangements put in place to monitor staff performance across the service were effective. This meant the service could be sure its staff were making the best contribution that they reasonably could during this period. Extra capacity was identified and reassigned to support other areas of the service and other organisations.

71. In the initial phase of the pandemic, the main role for wholetime firefighters was to provide the service’s core functions. Work to provide additional activities was done mainly by other parts of the workforce, including non-operational staff. This approach was taken because the service felt this was the best way to make sure it had the resources it needed to meet its immediately foreseeable risk and maintain its statutory functions. We expect services to keep their processes under review to make sure they use their wholetime workforces as productively as possible.

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

73. As part of its workforce planning, the service re-engaged retired members of staff to provide resilience across operational roles and to support its work under the agreed changes.

74. 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

75. 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.
The chair of Cheshire 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.

Arrangements were put in place to give fire and rescue authority members relevant and regular information about how the service responded to the pandemic. It made use of technology and held meetings virtually.

During the pandemic, members of 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

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.

Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service feels that it has improved significantly in how it works with other organisations during the pandemic. This includes its work with representative bodies and its LRF. The service is looking at ways it can support other organisations on a more permanent basis.

The health and wellbeing of the workforce is a priority for the service. It has offered flexible working arrangements, where possible, to accommodate any personal requirements and to support safe working practices. Its new handbook for managers gives details about the actions to be taken to control the spread of the virus and any subsequent effects on staff safety. It also covers changes to working practices, policies and procedures. The service has invested in virtual meeting platforms to support new ways of working, deliver training, and communicate with staff and the public.

Good practice and what worked was shared with other services through regional forums and the NFCC. These include guidance on carrying out driver training while considering social distancing and having the appropriate measures in place. In agreement with Cheshire Constabulary, the service also developed in-car signage for on-call firefighters. Firefighters used this signage to make other road users aware that they were responding to incidents, in order to avoid any delays.

Next steps

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,

Zoë Billingham
Her Majesty’s Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services
Her Majesty’s Inspector of Constabulary