



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

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**Wendy Williams**

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

Ben Ansell  
Chief Fire Officer  
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Councillor Rebecca Knox  
Chair  
Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Ansell and Cllr Knox,

**COVID-19 INSPECTION: DORSET & WILTSHIRE 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, which 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 for the positive contribution you and your service have made to your community during the pandemic. We inspected your service between 19 October and 30 October 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

5. In relation to your service, Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service declared a major incident on 27 March 2020.

6. In summary, we were pleased with how the service continued to maintain its core functions during the pandemic, in particular how innovatively it provided its prevention activities. A notable achievement was the creative way in which the prevention team promoted the Government's main

COVID-19 safety messages. For example, it produced several interactive road safety and school training packages for younger children that relate to COVID-19 specific issues. This material has been shared with several fire and rescue services, and local authorities. In addition, Road Safety GB has promoted it nationally.

7. In addition to the challenges of the pandemic, the service responded to its largest fire in recent history at Wareham Forest. This incident lasted over eight weeks. This large-scale incident needed more than 1,000 firefighters and the use of considerable resources across the service. We were impressed by how the service worked with its neighbouring fire and rescue services and the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC), as well as accessing and using national resilience assets during this incident. This gave the service assistance and support, as well as helping it to seamlessly manage the demands of the pandemic.

8. The service's strategic leadership team regularly communicated with its staff and had positive wellbeing support in place. An example was Wellbeing Wednesdays, where weekly bulletins were sent to all staff, reminding them of the importance of wellbeing. Many staff across the service volunteered for extra roles, such as driving ambulances. This meant the people of Dorset and Wiltshire were better supported through the pandemic. The service created a resourcing cell, which allowed it to reallocate and manage its staff to maintain its statutory functions and additional activities. The service had a good IT infrastructure in place, which enabled staff to work from home.

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, Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service should focus on the following areas:

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

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

### **Preparing for the pandemic**

10. In line with good governance, the service had a pandemic flu plan and business continuity plans in place which were in date. These plans were activated. The service was well prepared for remote working.

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 learnt during the pandemic.

13. The plans now include information on making sure its premises are COVID-19 secure and the need for staff to self-isolate.

### **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 NFCC. This means the service has continued to respond to calls from the public and attended emergencies. It did this by adapting its activities and working differently. It has continued to carry out safe and well visits to the most vulnerable people in the community. And it has introduced desktop fire safety reviews for high-risk premises.

### *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 the previous year.

17. The overall availability of fire engines was better during the pandemic than it was during the same period the previous year. Between 1 April and 30 June 2020, the service's average overall fire engine availability was 89.6 percent compared with 76.8 percent during the same period in 2019. We were told that this was as a result of an increased number of on-call firefighters being available to respond to emergencies. This was because many on-call firefighters had been furloughed from their primary employment, along with the service recording lower sickness levels. 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 improved during the pandemic compared with the same period in 2019. This was due to better fire engine availability, lower absence levels and less road traffic during this period. 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 to make sure that its control room had enough staff during the pandemic. This included effective resilience arrangements, such as recalling control room staff who were deployed in other areas of the service. The service is part of the Networked Fire Services Partnership with Devon & Somerset and Hampshire fire and rescue services, where it can redirect calls if necessary. It also had a process in place with control rooms of neighbouring services to exchange daily information, should support be needed.

20. During the initial stage of the pandemic, the service experienced its largest fire in recent history. The fire burnt 220 hectares of Wareham Forest and was extinguished over an eight-week period. The response required more than 1,000 firefighters, plus resources from across

the service, as well as from other services to supplement it. We were pleased to see how the service maintained its operational resilience across the area.

### *Prevention*

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

22. The service conducted fewer safe and well visits 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. It introduced a 'high-risk review decision process', which helps the service to assess the most vulnerable. The prevention manager and team leaders held a daily meeting where they assessed whether an individual required further support. COVID-19 related risks were considered as part of the assessment. As a result, staff carried out face-to-face safe and well visits to the most vulnerable, based on a risk assessment. The service gave staff suitable personal protective equipment for these visits. It continued to receive partner agency referrals and prioritised them when necessary.

23. The service introduced the option of a safe and well check by telephone. The service made a total of 1,700 telephone calls to the most vulnerable.

24. The service was creative in the way it provided its children and younger persons activities. For example, it created road safety training packages such as 'essential travel', which promoted the government's main COVID-19 safety messages. Road Safety GB recognised this and published it on its website. The service shared all its content with several fire and rescue services and local authorities across the UK.

### *Protection*

25. 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 guidance also included carrying out audits on premises at the greatest risk from fire. The service adopted this guidance.

26. The service reviewed how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic. It continued to give support and guidance to care homes. The service gave fire safety advice to hotels offering accommodation to vulnerable people. This included advice about evacuation strategies and staff training.

27. The service conducted fewer fire safety audits than it would normally undertake. It introduced desktop fire safety audits and carried out 107 of them by using the short audit form. It decided to stop face-to-face fire safety audits, to minimise face-to-face contact between members of staff and the public.

28. The service continued to issue prohibition notices. It didn't issue any alteration notices or enforcement notices, but it had the ability to do so. It continued responding to statutory building control consultations.

29. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact, such as using the telephone to discuss with the responsible person whether an enforcement notice needed to be extended. The service used its website and social media platforms to promote fire safety awareness and compliance.

30. The service 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.

31. A Nightingale hospital was planned in the service area along with mortuary support facilities. The service worked with the facility's responsible person to put in place suitable and reasonable fire safety measures.

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

32. The service considered the wellbeing needs of staff. Senior leaders actively promoted wellbeing services and encouraged staff to discuss any worries they had. The service had a dedicated COVID-19 telephone line for staff to report any absences. It also offered wellbeing support. The service required all departmental managers to carry out a working from home survey with their staff to discuss health and safety, and enable them to work effectively.

33. 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 health and wellbeing team. The service sent a weekly Wellbeing Wednesdays bulletin to all staff. Staff could access the service's dedicated COVID-19 section on the intranet, which featured a frequently asked questions section. It also contained information about financial wellbeing support. Those staff who volunteered for the mortuary support facility received regular welfare checks from the service. Once the facility was no longer needed, each volunteer received a trauma risk management practitioners' assessment to provide further wellbeing support if required.

34. More could have been done to identify and address the specific needs of staff members most at risk of COVID-19, including those from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background and those with underlying health problems. Staff who were most at risk of COVID-19 had to self-identify and show their NHS shielding notification letters before the service made reasonable adjustments. The service supported staff with family members who were shielding, putting in place appropriate adjustments to meet their needs.

35. Wellbeing information was exchanged with other services across the south-west region. The service has discussed with its staff how it should plan for the potential longer-term effects of COVID-19 on its workforce.

36. The service made sure that firefighters were competent to do their work during the pandemic. The service adapted arrangements and ensured it had adequate health and safety provisions in place. This allowed the continuation of its on-call firefighters' weekly training. The service paused firefighter fitness tests during this period, but support was provided.

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

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

#### *Staff absence*

39. Absences have decreased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of days/shifts lost due to sickness absence decreased by 39.6 percent between 1 April and 30 June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019.

40. 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 absences, pay and terms and conditions, testing requirements, and details on annual leave arrangements. Also, the service has a dedicated telephone line for staff to report any issues or COVID-19 related absences. It routinely collected data on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home. And it has introduced a dashboard to easily identify staff who have been affected by COVID-19.

#### *Staff engagement*

41. Most staff survey respondents told us that the service provided regular and relevant communication to all staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included weekly Wellbeing Wednesdays bulletins and weekly COVID-19 updates, service-wide question time sessions with senior leaders, major incident command briefings and discussions with line managers. The strategic leadership team continued its staff engagement across all groups by using online platforms including Microsoft Teams.

42. In May 2020, the service carried out two staff surveys. It sent its first survey to all staff, seeking feedback on staff welfare. It sent its second survey to middle managers and above, to consider how the service has managed the COVID-19 pandemic. Both surveys showed positive results.

43. Because of changes to the service's ways of working in response to COVID-19, it intends to maintain some aspects of flexible and remote working. Further information is provided later in this letter.

## **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 experiencing high levels of demand, and to offer other support to its communities.

45. The service carried out the following new activities: ambulance driving; delivering essential items to vulnerable persons; movement of bodies; fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff who worked with COVID-19 patients; and packing/re-packing food for vulnerable people. The service trained staff so they were prepared to transfer patients to and from Nightingale hospitals. But ultimately, this wasn't required.

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 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.

47. The service consulted locally to implement the tripartite agreement with the FBU, the Fire Officers Association and the Fire and Rescue Services Association.

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

49. 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.

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

51. Operational and non-operational staff carried out additional roles on a voluntary basis. Staff who volunteered to carry out extra work under the tripartite agreement were reallocated from their normal duties. For example, it redeployed some prevention and protection staff to fit face masks for ambulance, hospice and healthcare employees across different locations. Staff who volunteered for tripartite activities and worked outside their core hours were paid at their normal hourly rate.

52. All activities to support other organisations during this period were monitored and reviewed. For example, the service recorded the number of incidents to which it responded. It also recorded how many welfare packages it delivered to the most vulnerable people in its community. The service hasn't yet fully identified which activities it wishes to continue.

### *Local resilience forum*

53. 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). Local resilience forums are aligned to police force boundaries. The service's boundary encompasses two local police force areas. Therefore, Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service is a member of two LRFs: Dorset and Wiltshire & Swindon.

54. The service was an active member of both LRFs during the pandemic. The service told us that the LRFs' arrangements enabled the service to fully engage in the multi-agency response.

55. As part of Dorset LRF's response to COVID-19, the service was the deputy chair of the overall LRF and was a member of the strategic and tactical co-ordination groups. It was also an active member of a number of sub-groups and managed the civil contingency unit, which ran the multi-agency information sub-group.

56. As part of Wiltshire & Swindon LRF's response to COVID-19, the service was the deputy chair for the overall LRF and chaired the testing and tracing sub-group. It was a member of the strategic co-ordination group; separate sub-groups; and the community resilience hubs in Wiltshire and Swindon.

57. The service could allocate suitably qualified staff to participate in these groups without affecting its core duties.

### **Use of resources**

58. The pandemic hasn't yet significantly affected the service's financial position.

59. The service has made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. 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.

60. The service received just over £1.3m of extra government funding to support its response. It spent a total of £208,000 in the initial phase of the pandemic. By 30 June 2020, most of its costs were spent on staffing (£134,915) and PPE (£47,759). South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust funded the ambulance driving on a cost recovery basis. The service has shown how it used this income efficiently, and that it mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period.

61. The service didn't use any of its reserves to meet the extra costs that arose during this period. It maintained the smooth running of its service during this period. The service will continue to use the remaining government funding to support its response to COVID-19.



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

#### *Ways of working*

63. The service changed how it operated during the pandemic. For example, it changed how it offered prevention activities, and it used virtual platforms for meetings. The service had invested in its IT infrastructure previously and it had the necessary IT to support remote working where appropriate.

64. The service could quickly implement changes to how it operates. It set up a resourcing cell, which allowed a central team to monitor all staffing movements during this period. For example, if there were any wholetime crewing shortages, the resourcing team could identify and move staff to relevant stations to manage and maintain the availability of its fire engines. This allowed the service to use its resources efficiently during the pandemic. The service plans to consider maintaining its resourcing cell in the future.

65. The senior leaders have 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.

66. 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*

67. The service had enough resources available to respond to demand during the COVID-19 pandemic, and used its resourcing cell effectively to re-allocate staff where necessary to support the work of its partner organisations.

68. 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. The service identified and reassigned extra capacity to support other areas of the service and other organisations. Its performance dashboard enabled it to monitor staff performance and resources.

69. For most of the pandemic, the main role for wholetime firefighters was to provide the service's core responsibilities and to undertake work under the tripartite agreement. We expect services to keep their processes under review to make sure they use their wholetime workforces as productively as possible.

70. The on-call workforce took on extra responsibilities. They did this by adopting some of the roles that were agreed as part of the tripartite agreement (such as ambulance driving). Some on-call firefighters also covered shifts for wholetime firefighters.

71. Non-operational members of staff also did work under the tripartite agreement, such as fitting face masks. Some were trained to support community welfare checks.

### **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 make sure that the budget is spent wisely.

73. The chair of Dorset & Wiltshire 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.

74. The fire and rescue authority and the service maintained a constructive relationship. The fire and rescue authority put arrangements in place to give its members relevant and regular information about how the service responded to the pandemic. It used videoconferencing technology to hold meetings virtually.

75. 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**

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. The service was quick to adapt its prevention activities. Prevention staff produced online training packages and the service communicated key messages to the public. The service wishes to continue this approach alongside face-to-face activities. This should enhance the way it delivers messages about road safety, and safety messages to children. The service maintained good resilience while responding to the major incident fire at Wareham Forest and used its resourcing cell effectively in its response.

78. The service has regularly engaged with its workforce. It offered regular staff bulletins and regular service-wide question time sessions with senior leaders. It carried out a working from home health and safety survey to enable staff to work from home, and promptly actioned any resulting points. The service had previously invested in its IT infrastructure, which allowed staff to effectively work from home. The service has considerably increased its communication to all staff. It will continue using its virtual platforms to provide updates and to communicate with its wider workforce.

79. 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.

80. In July 2020, the service experienced an outbreak of COVID-19 with several firefighters testing positive. The service successfully used its own internal track and trace system. This quickly identified all those staff members who were in close contact with the firefighters who had tested positive. This resulted in several firefighters having to self-isolate. The service could maintain its response resilience across the service area, and it shared this information with the NFCC and Public Health England.

### **Next steps**

81. This letter will be published on our website. We propose to restart 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  
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