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Services

Chief fire officers
Chairs of fire authorities
Police, fire and crime commissioners
Police and crime commissioners
Lead fire authority members
Locally elected mayors
Other FRS interested parties

14 January 2021

Dear Colleague,

FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE INSPECTIONS UPDATE

I wish you a happy new year in these very difficult circumstances. I write to provide further information about our plans for starting the second round of fire and rescue service (FRS) inspections. This includes how we plan to respond to the most recent round of restrictions and additional demands on services.

Round 2

2. I wrote on 27 November 2020 to inform services of their tranche allocation. We all knew the pandemic was likely to continue over the winter period, and the new national lockdown that is now in place means that we have reconsidered our plans. Sir Thomas Winsor will be writing out to all inspected bodies shortly to set out our decision to continue with remote inspection activity only while these restrictions are in place.

3. We recognise the continuing effect the pandemic is having on services. We spoke to colleagues in the NFCC and those chiefs whose inspections are planned for early in tranche one about whether it is reasonable and practical to carry on and received a universally positive response. We are very grateful for their support for continuing inspection.

4. We will continue our inspection programme albeit, in an appropriately modified way for the time being. All inspection activity we do carry out will be done remotely until the current restrictions lift. We will extend the inspection window and we will be flexible about our deadlines for evidence returns on a case by case basis. We will speak to each chief fire officer nearer their inspection to discuss how we can complete it in the least disruptive way, including when restrictions change.

5. We intend to reassess the position for the first tranche of inspections in mid-February. When we do, we will speak to the services in that tranche to determine whether further changes to the inspection schedule or approach are necessary. **Annex A** sets out more detail about our inspection plans. **Annex B** explains our approach to virtual and on-site evidence gathering. This should result in a less disruptive inspection because we will be able to spread virtual activity over a longer window to better accommodate individual service's availability. We are grateful to our external reference group members for their support in developing this approach.

6. When life returns a greater degree of normality, hopefully by the summer, we will still continue to minimise the time we spend on-site in those services scheduled for later tranches and also make more use of virtual inspection methods.

Document and self-assessment request

7. Our document request for tranche one services will be issued w/c 18 January 2021. For tranche one services who had submitted their documents at the beginning of round two at the start of last year, there is no need to resubmit documents that have not changed.

8. Please ask your service liaison lead to talk to your service liaison officer to determine which of these documents will need to be resubmitted.

9. The self-assessment template has been adjusted to provide you with the opportunity to give an update about the action you are taking following the Covid-19 inspection. This is so that we can give credit for any improvements that have been made within your next inspection report.

Staff survey and independent reporting line

10. As with the first round of inspections, we will be conducting a staff survey for all staff that work for English fire and rescue services. We do not consider the staff survey in isolation, and the results will be used as a measure of service performance and to triangulate further evidence obtained during inspection.

11. This survey will be circulated prior to each service inspection, starting in February 2021 preceding the first tranche of inspections. We rely on your help to promote this survey and I would be very grateful for anything you could do to encourage your staff to complete this survey. This helps to ensure we have a good representation of your staff's views.

12. Our independent reporting line also remains open to all fire and rescue service staff in England. The purpose of this line is to provide staff with a mechanism to inform us of any issues, and areas of good practice, which they feel should be taken into consideration both prior to and during inspection. This is not a whistleblowing service, or a route for complaints to be resolved. It is simply a way in which to gather additional evidence outside of fieldwork. Link to the independent reporting line can be found [here](#).

Short term secondees

14. As with round one of our inspections, we are keen to continue to draw on the expertise of the sector by deploying short term secondees on the inspection of your services. This would mean releasing staff to work for us on a remote basis for approximately 4-6 weeks, arranged for a time convenient for both side. I recognise that many services will not be able to support this arrangement at the moment due to your ongoing response to the pandemic, but this is something that will cover the whole inspection programme. These individuals will enjoy the benefit from taking part in inspection activity periodically, without being seconded away from their service for two years.

15. We will launch a formal recruitment process in due course with more details of what this would entail. In the meantime, I encourage you to consider who within your organisation demonstrates the best of the sector, and who would benefit from such an opportunity as part of your work to develop talented staff.

Forthcoming publications

16. We intend to publish three reports over the coming months.

(a) Covid-19 – national report and 44 service reports: reports will all be published **00:01 Friday 22 January 2021**. Services will be provided an embargoed copy of their final report 24-48 hours prior to publication.

(b) London Fire Brigade/Grenfell Tower Inquiry phase 1 recommendations report: **10 February 2021**; and

(c) State of Fire and Rescue 2020: early March 2021 (tbc).

Proposed events

17. We think it will be helpful to convene a chiefs and chairs meeting to talk you through our plans for round 2 and answer any questions that you may have. We therefore propose to hold a virtual session in the morning of **Monday 25 January**. This will follow a similar format to the session we held before our Covid-19 inspections. A Teams invite will be sent later today. We recognise the demands placed upon chief fire officers and services, so we're happy for this invite to be delegated as required.

18. In collaboration with the NFCC, we will also hold an event for service liaison officers. This is planned for Thursday 28 January. The NFCC will send invites later this week.

19. If you require any further information then please do not hesitate to contact either me or Laura Gibb, the portfolio director via (LauraAlice.Gibb@hmicfrs.gov.uk).

20. Thank you again for your continued support of our inspection programme during what we all appreciate is a very difficult time for you, your families and your colleagues.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Zoë Billingham". The signature is written in a cursive style and is contained within a light grey rectangular box.

Zoë Billingham

HM Inspector of Constabulary

HM Inspector of Fire and Rescue Services

ANNEX A – ROUND 2 TIMEFRAME

Tranche 1:

FRS	Document and self-assessment request	Inspection activity starts	Publication
Cheshire	w/c 18 Jan 2021 – w/c 15 Feb 2021	w/c 22 Feb	Winter 2021
Cambridgeshire	w/c 18 Jan 2021 – w/c 15 Feb 2021	w/c 22 Feb	Winter 2021
Bedfordshire	w/c 18 Jan 2021 – w/c 15 Feb 2021	w/c 22 Feb	Winter 2021
Warwickshire	w/c 18 Jan 2021 – w/c 15 Feb 2021	w/c 1 Mar	Winter 2021
Cornwall	w/c 18 Jan 2021 – w/c 15 Feb 2021	w/c 29 Mar	Winter 2021
Surrey	w/c 18 Jan 2021 – w/c 15 Feb 2021	w/c 29 Mar	Winter 2021

Decision about inspection schedule mid-February 2021

Lincolnshire	w/c 18 Jan 2021	w/c 5 Apr	Winter 2021
Hereford & Worcestershire	w/c 18 Jan 2021	w/c 12 Apr	Winter 2021
Merseyside	w/c 18 Jan 2021	w/c 10 May	Winter 2021
Avon	w/c 18 Jan 2021	w/c 10 May	Winter 2021
Buckinghamshire	w/c 18 Jan 2021	w/c 24 May	Winter 2021
Essex	w/c 18 Jan 2021	w/c 24 May	Winter 2021
Greater Manchester	w/c 18 Jan 2021	w/c 07 Jun	Winter 2021
Northumberland	w/c 18 Jan 2021	w/c 07 Jun	Winter 2021

Tranche 2:

Document and self-assessment request: May/June 2021

Fieldwork: September 2021 - February 2022

Publication: Summer 2022

Tranche 3:

Document and self-assessment request: January 2022

Fieldwork: March - September 2022

Publication: Winter 2022

ANNEX B – FLEXIBLE INSPECTION APPROACH

Suitable for virtual	SLL/SLO assessment	Not suitable
<p>Data collection</p> <p>Reporting line</p> <p>Survey</p> <p>Document review</p> <p>Self-assessment</p> <p>Strategic engagement</p> <p>Interviews</p>	<p>Desk-top process walkthroughs</p> <p>Work-place system/case review</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Screen sharing • Remote access • Data download • On-site <p>Focus groups</p>	<p>Control room & station reality testing</p> <p>Work-place system testing</p> <p>Work-place knowledge checks</p>