



Safest People, Safest Places

Combined Fire Authority

19 February 2021

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services Update

Report of the Area Manager Assets and Assurance

Purpose of the report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update on the COVID-19 thematic inspection of Fire and Rescue Services in England and next steps of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS).

Background

2. In August 2020, under section 28A(3) of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, HMICFRS were commissioned by the Home Secretary to inspect the response to the COVID-19 pandemic of the fire and rescue sector in England.
3. Specifically, the inspectorate was asked to consider:
 - (a) what is working well and what is being learnt;
 - (b) how the fire and rescue sector is responding to the COVID-19 crisis;
 - (c) how fire and rescue services are dealing with the problems they face; and
 - (d) what changes are likely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. The scope of the inspection included:
 - (a) Activity to protect communities and limit the spread of COVID-19, including the tripartite agreement;
 - (b) Safety and wellbeing of staff during COVID-19;
 - (c) Maintenance of statutory functions during COVID-19;
 - (d) Sharing and promoting best practice during COVID-19; and
 - (e) Capability to co-ordinate and broker requests for mutual aid during COVID-19.
5. County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service (CDDFRS) was inspected the week beginning 2 November 2020. The inspection was conducted entirely virtually, with interviews using Microsoft Teams.
6. HMICFRS previously indicated they would aim to restart the round two Fire and Rescue Services inspection programme in early 2021, running through to autumn 2022.

Thematic COVID-19 Inspection Outcome

7. Unlike previous inspections there was no grading for Fire and Rescue Services, instead the inspectorate produced a written report setting out their assessment of the effectiveness of the Service's response to the pandemic.
8. They also produced an overarching report on the whole sectors' response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
9. A copy of CDDFRS's report is attached as Appendix A.
10. In summary, the Service adapted and responded to the pandemic effectively. It continued to maintain its statutory functions, including responding to emergencies. It adapted its approach to prevention and protection activities to enhance social distancing and keep communities safe. It was willing to give extra support to partners, but there was little requirement for staff to do additional activities.
11. The report was complementary about CDDFRS increasing operational staffing to ensure continued delivery of statutory duties; providing fast-tracked testing for staff at local hospitals; improved communications and effectively using technology to allow staff to work remotely with very little or no effect on performance.
12. There were two areas identified where the Service can learn lessons and work is already underway to build this learning into future plans. These were:
 - a. The Service should use the lessons it has learned from the pandemic to date, to update its plans, including its business continuity and pandemic flu plans; and
 - b. The Service should identify those staff at a higher risk from COVID-19, so it can put appropriate wellbeing and support provisions in place.

National Thematic COVID-19 Inspection Report

13. The national report highlighted that overall Fire and Rescue Services responded very well to the outbreak maintaining their ability to respond to fires and other emergencies, although in some cases response was prioritised to the detriment of prevention and protection activities.
14. The report also highlighted strong multi-agency working in every area through Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) and the fire sector coming together well to support national guidance.
15. The report recognised the hard work and enormous dedication of many across the fire and rescue sector with the support given to communities, with firefighters and staff stepping up to take on a range of pandemic activities, including driving ambulances, delivering essential items to the most vulnerable and personal protective equipment (PPE) to those working in healthcare.
16. The report discusses in some detail, the 'tripartite agreement' which was designed to enable the National Employers, National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) and Fire Brigades Union (FBU) to determine the additional activities firefighters would carry out in support of the Fire and Rescue Services' response to the pandemic. It highlights that despite the initial intentions of those involved, the mechanism rapidly became too prescriptive and, in some services, it became a hindrance rather than a help.
17. A copy of the national report is attached as Appendix B.

Round Two Fire and Rescue Service Inspections

18. HMICFRS have confirmed plans to continue their round two inspection programme albeit, in an appropriately modified way. They intend to restart the Fire and Rescue Services inspection programme in February 2021, running through to September 2022.
19. All inspection activity will be done remotely until the current restrictions lift and they will spread virtual activity over a longer window. The Inspectorate intends to speak to each Chief Fire Officer to discuss how they can complete the inspection in the least disruptive way.
20. CDDFRS's inspection is expected to be in tranche 3 with fieldwork inspection activity taking place between March and September 2022 with the report published in Winter 2022.

Recommendations

21. CFA Members are requested to:
 - a. **note** the contents of this report;
 - b. **receive** further reports as appropriate.