

Answers from County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service to the specific questions posed

(a) what do you think are the most pressing areas for reform in the fire sector?

There are a number of key areas that are pressing in terms of reform in the sector. It is concerning that little progress has been made on the recommendations made in State of Fire 2019 and then re-stated in State of Fire 2020:

- the Home Office should precisely determine the role of fire and rescue services, to remove any ambiguity;
- the sector should remove unjustifiable variation, including how they define risk;
- the sector should review and reform how effectively pay and conditions are determined;
- the Home Office should invest chief fire officers with operational independence, whether through primary legislation or in some other manner;
- the Home Office should ensure that the sector has sufficient capacity and capability to bring about change

The sector needs a clear steer from the Home Office about what the Government's expectations are going forward. A strong vision underpinned with clear statutory responsibilities to play a wider role and add more value to society is important.

HMICFRS have also recognised that the on-call model needs significant reform in order to become sustainable. Although County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service would have welcomed a specific recommendation covering this issue, it is still a vital area for reform. Government support for the sector in this area is important and there are opportunities to introduce tax incentives for both individuals and primary employers of on-call staff that would make the system more sustainable without driving costs at a local level. Without a strategic view being taken from Government the system is likely to continue to struggle.

The lack of a longer-term sustainable funding settlement for the sector hinders future planning. Fire and Rescue Services (FRSs) are facing a range of significant cost pressures from issues such as: employer pension contribution increases; unfunded pay increases; uncertainty in inflation rates; and the future economic impact of both Brexit and Covid-19. Operating with this level of uncertainty is challenging especially as, if some of these risks were to materialise, they would require fundamental changes to the operating model of some FRSs. The Government should provide longer term certainty in relation to grant levels, flexibility in relation to precept increases and capital funding for those FRSs that have not accumulated high levels of reserves.

The system for national negotiations and the intransigence of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), stifles reform in the sector. Whilst there is an important role for trade unions, and employers should not simply be free to amend contracts of employment without negotiation and consultation the current balance of power makes reform exceptionally difficult and at times impossible. Constructive and mutually respectful industrial relations at national and local levels is important but the current mechanisms simply encourage the FBU to adopt a no change position unless their demands are met. The current system severely limits the options for the employers to bring about sensible change.

(b) where do you think the fire sector ought to be in 2026;

In 2026 the FRS should be a modern, highly professional and flexible emergency service that has a much wider role in keeping the public safe from a range of hazards and threats. Chief Fire Officers would have the ability to deploy all their resources flexibly to undertake any activities linked to saving lives, protecting the public, or protecting the environment. The FRS would play a wider role in responding to civil emergencies and would be a key player in delivering the government's vision of the UK being the most resilient nation.

The sector would work in partnership to ensure that the knowledge and expertise in prevention work plays a vital role in improving the lives of the local population.

In 2026 the sector should be auditing a larger range of business premises and higher risk buildings to ensure the safety of residents and workers.

The sector should have a greater diversity of operational staff and highly effective talent management schemes to develop people as future leaders.

The FRS would be highly efficient and effective but with a sustainable funding model that encouraged innovation and delivered a world class fire and rescue service.

(c) what changes have occurred – both locally and nationally – in response to the first round of our inspections; what effect have they had, or do you expect them to have;

The first round of inspections has focussed the minds of key stakeholders on the areas that need to improve across the sector. This has improved the self-awareness of many FRSs and also ensured resources were committed to help address areas for improvement and cause for concerns. Nationally there has been investment in the NFCC and the Fire Standards Board which will help deliver significant sector-wide benefits. NFCC workstreams should also improve standards across all FRSs in the UK. It is however disappointing that the Home Office has not made more progress with some of the recommendations that were made nearly two years ago. Whilst a delay was inevitable due to the pandemic there has still be surprisingly little progress in some areas.

There has been a significant resource requirement for FRSs to service the needs of the inspection programme and this has for some FRSs been challenging to find following significant funding reductions over many years.

There has also been tension in industrial relations as a result of the inspection programme and the challenges posed towards the FBU. Given the strength of FBU membership and at times blind following of members there appears to be a strong distrust of HMICFRS in FRSs.

(d) COVID-19 continues to test the resilience of every service; what went well and what could be improved;

Overall CDDFRS coped well with the pandemic. The Service implemented a range of measures to increase staffing and mitigate the impacts that were being experienced. The investment made in a strong ICT infrastructure in previous years meant corporate staff could work effectively from home immediately without a reduction in performance. We worked well with partners and provided a range of additional support when required. Staff responded well to the challenges they faced and adopted flexible working arrangements to continue to focus on the services provided to the public. We had strong supportive welfare arrangements in place for staff and the improved communication methods we used were effective and appreciated by staff. A range of debriefs have been undertaken and important lessons learnt to further improve our business continuity plans.

CDDFRS played a leading role in the LRF and provided leadership at all levels to ensure successful multi-agency working. The NFCC delivered a significant amount during the pandemic and provided excellent leadership for FRSs.

The issues associated with the collapse of the tri-partite arrangements further underpinned the need for change in the national negotiating machinery. On a positive note, many staff locally chose to ignore the advice of the FBU and continued to undertake additional roles to support our communities. These decisions are culturally very important and will hopefully help with future change that is likely to be required over the next few years.

(e) what short-term changes do you think COVID-19 has had on individual services and the sector;

The use of technology and flexible approaches to working have improved the Service. The Service is more resilient than it was prior to the pandemic and staff appreciate a more agile approach to working where appropriate. Importantly staff showed a strong desire to take on additional roles and responsibilities despite the advice being received from the FBU. The use of innovative approaches in prevention and protection have increased the offer in these areas to the public. The service is more aware and thinking differently in terms of business continuity management. Introducing different crewing models and extending the use of smaller response vehicles has provided useful intelligence and data to drive decision making. The methods adopted to improve communication have been well received by staff and are becoming the norm for many people. The increased cleaning regimes and improved hygiene facilities across the entire estate have been adopted as good practice going forward.

The LRF is functioning well as a result of stronger relationships being formed over a protracted response period. A greater number of organisations and individuals have a more in-depth knowledge of the LRF and the value it brings to an area. The sector is working smarter and utilising technology to reduce travel and extraction costs for meetings etc.

(f) what medium- and long-term changes do you think COVID-19 is having and will have on individual services and the sector;

Technology will play a greater role in the sector over the longer term and FRSs will become more innovative. Staff are constantly thinking about improvements and realise that their ideas are listened to and can make lasting changes. Efficiencies are likely to be achieved on the use of estates following a general move to hybrid working, this could also provide opportunities for further collaboration with other partners as rationalisation of buildings occurs across the public sector.

The flexibility of the sector during the pandemic should lead to a wider role for the FRS in civil emergencies. The ability to adapt to a range of different scenarios and commit highly skilled staff in reasonable numbers immediately to an incident is a unique selling point of the FRS.

There is a different culture emerging in the sector which is more supportive of national decision making and following good practice guidance from the NFCC. This will reap long term benefits for the sector and should lead to longer-term efficiencies. In the longer-term the improved welfare arrangements that have been introduced in response to Covid-19 will hopefully improve the wellbeing of staff and help reduce absence rates going forward. This needs to be balanced off with the potentially longer-term negative impact covid-19 might have on the mental health of staff in the public sector in general. If the pandemic continues over the longer-term this will potentially be a growing issue.

There are, however, so longer-term concerns about the impact of Covid-19 on the sector. There is a lack of clarity around Government or sector rules around self-isolation. Covid-19 has led to staffing pressures for the sector and without any guidance it is more difficult to predict the impact over the longer-term.

There is also a lack of guidance in relation to staff that have long covid and how this will potentially impact their ability to do their roles going forward. FRSs are unsure how to treat people who may not be able to regain sufficient fitness to continue in operational roles and this is likely to increase costs.

Maintaining the additional ICT infrastructure, improved cleaning regimes and increased need for additional PPE will also increase cost pressures over the longer-term. It appears unlikely that any further additional funding will be provided to FRSs and therefore these increased costs will need to be met from existing budgets which are already under significant pressure, and this may increase as the economic impact of covid-19 impacts on future funding settlements.

(g) what has your organisation done to implement the learning and recommendations made in the Grenfell Tower Inquiry's Phase 1 report (published on 30 October 2019); and

The Service carried out a full internal gap analysis on the recommendations made from the Grenfell Tower Inquiry's Phase 1 report. A detailed action plan has been developed which is being tracked through our normal governance arrangements. The action plan includes:

- Increasing the establishment of the central business fire safety team;
- Increasing the qualifications of operational staff who are required to undertake fire safety audits;
- Updated operational procedures for firefighters and control room operators;
- Training for control room staff;
- Introducing smoke hoods to all frontline fire appliances;
- Carrying out training and exercising with neighbouring FRSs;
- Implementing a specific project to audit the operational and risk information for all tall buildings/higher risk buildings in the service area.
- Improved incident ground communications.

Currently there are no high-rise residential buildings in our service area, however, many of the items in the action plan improve our approach to firefighting and risk management of all buildings.

(h) what are your current people priorities, and what challenges are you facing to implement your people strategy?

CDDFRS' People Strategy 2021-24 outlines our priorities in relation to people. These include:

- Developing the leadership potential and ability in the organisation to ensure we have the correct talent currently and into the future.
- Ensuring our workforce composition meets our current and future needs and we have the right people, with the right talent in the right roles.
- Increasing the diversity of the workforce.
- Identifying and nurturing talent in the organisation.
- Ensuring we engage effectively with all staff groups.
- Developing operational excellence across the service.

We face a number of challenges in achieving these priorities. The current industrial relations climate at a national level leads to uncertainty from some staff about the benefits of adopting more flexible working patterns and expanding the roles we undertake outside of any national negotiations. At times the message from the FBU is at odds with our core values and this leads to uncertainty with staff. The content of the forthcoming White Paper has the potential to worsen industrial relations and lead to increased support for the FBU which could undermine the progress we have made locally in relation to culture. Any difficulties in relationships at a national level between key stakeholders (Home Office, NFCC, HMICFRS) and the FBU tend to lead to difficulties at a local level. Whilst tensions are a natural part of any change programme and inevitable with the Home Office's Fire Reform Programme it is also important that key stakeholders are fully aware of this and take it into account when thinking about the language they use and the messages they put out.

The structure of the national negotiation system, power of the FBU to block changes to working conditions and current restrictive national terms and conditions make progressing innovative practice in relation to people challenging. The FBU effectively hold a veto to even relatively minor changes that are either covered in the Grey Book or perceived to be outside of the rolemaps.

Workforce planning is particularly challenging at present as we have no certainty in relation to future funding. We are potentially facing a high turn-over of staff due to the recent changes in the firefighter pension schemes but without certainty around funding decisions on recruitment are difficult.

The on-call system still remains challenging to sustain. The system requires significant investment, and this is particularly difficult to find without support from the centre. The Government should consider supporting both individuals and organisations that release their employees to support the on-call system.

Whilst the Service support the work being delivered by the NFCC in relation to the People Programme it is at times, difficult to align progress at a national level with progress and innovation at a local level. National guidance is helpful, but it should not hinder innovation and there is a role for HMICFRS in ensuring it doesn't narrowly focus on NFCC products which may not always align with local needs. Maintaining a healthy balance between standardisation and innovation is important. It is also difficult for some FRSs to wait for particular national packages which don't align with the priorities and needs at a local level.