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Chief Fire Officer  
Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor Andy Crump  
Chair  
Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Authority

22 January 2021

Dear Mr Amos and Cllr Crump,

### **COVID-19 INSPECTION: WARWICKSHIRE 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 28 September and 9 October 2020. This letter summarises our findings.

5. In relation to your service, Warwickshire Local Resilience Forum (LRF) declared a major incident on 19 March 2020.

6. In summary, we were impressed with how Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service maintained its statutory functions and made good use of its staff to carry out additional duties to support the community during the pandemic. It primarily used its wholetime firefighters to respond

to emergencies. The service used the increased availability of its on-call workforce beyond their normal operational commitment to help support those most vulnerable in the community.

7. It also offered a range of additional support to help its communities during the pandemic. For example, staff made telephone calls to vulnerable people to check on their welfare. They delivered food parcels and prescriptions, and transported people from hospital to their homes.

8. The service managed resources well. And it received a government grant, which meant that its financial position was largely unaffected. The service was able to maintain the resilience of its control room by putting in place measures to protect the health and safety of those staff. The service worked well with partners to manage the impacts of the pandemic. It supported its staff well during the pandemic, making sure their health, safety and wellbeing were protected. The service identified a potential issue of whether on-call firefighters would qualify for furloughed payments for their primary employment given their on-call contract and related payments. The service raised the issue promptly with the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC), which worked with the Department for Work and Pensions and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to clarify the position that on-call firefighters were able to still do their role. This advice helped other fire and rescue services.

9. The service supported staff working from home. Through the county council, every member of staff who was required to work from home was entitled to buy additional equipment to support this.

10. The service is now considering how to use its wholetime and on-call workforce more effectively to build resilience and take on more community-focused activity.

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, Warwickshire 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 continue to develop its approach to those staff at higher risk from COVID-19, to make sure that they get the right wellbeing and support provisions in place.

(c) It should make sure it has processes in place to work and negotiate effectively with all appropriate staff associations about subjects relevant to their members.

(d) It should also make sure wholetime firefighters are fully productive, while minimising the risk of them contracting or spreading the virus.

## **Preparing for the pandemic**

12. In line with good governance, the service had a pandemic flu plan and business continuity plans in place that were in date. These plans were activated.
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.
14. The service has reviewed its plans to reflect the changing situation and what it has learned during the pandemic.
15. The service identified early the need for specific planning over and above the planning in its existing business continuity and pandemic flu plans. The service is now making changes to prevention, protection and road safety work. It is also better aligning its activities to the government COVID-19 alert levels, and giving clearer communications to staff.

## **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 NFCC. This means the service has continued to respond to calls from the public and attend emergencies. It continued to offer a home fire risk check to those people who it identified as being most at risk from fire. It also contacted vulnerable people who were known to other agencies, to offer wellbeing support. The service carried out desktop reviews of premises risks, and continued its enforcement activity. It also continued to respond to statutory building consultations.

## *Response*

18. The service told us that between 1 April and 30 June 2020 it attended fewer incidents than it did during the same period in 2019.
19. The overall availability of fire engines was better during the pandemic than it was during the same period in 2019. Between 1 April and 30 June 2020, the service's average overall fire engine availability was 93.5 percent compared with 87.0 percent during the same period in 2019. We were told this was due to several factors, including staff being flexible with their leave arrangements, fewer staff absences due to the strict measures in place to reduce the risk of infection in the workplace, and more on-call firefighters being available to respond to emergencies due to them being furloughed or made redundant from their primary employment.
20. The service didn't change its crewing models or shift patterns during this period, but it did have plans in place to reduce standard crewing on fire engines if the need arose.

21. The service told us that its average response time to fires increased during the pandemic compared with the same period in 2019. This was mainly due to the location of incidents being rural and further away from stations. This may not be reflected in [official statistics recently published by the Home Office](#), because services don't all collect and calculate their data the same way.

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

23. The service put in place measures to protect the staff in the control room. These included isolating the control room from other parts of the service, restricting visitors to the control room and maintaining hygiene. Its ability to maintain a control room function would have been at risk if it had experienced increased sickness levels. However, the service is also able to draw on support from Northamptonshire fire control.

#### *Prevention*

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

25. The service conducted fewer safe and well visits than it would normally undertake. 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. It found that the type of people at risk hadn't changed significantly.

26. The service decided to stop offering face-to-face safe and well visits in order to protect staff and the community. It introduced the option of a safe and well visit by telephone. However, when the service identified a significant risk to an individual, or it wasn't able to contact the individual after repeated calls, then staff paid a visit. It also introduced other options. These included making wellbeing telephone calls to vulnerable people on behalf of other agencies and posting safety messages on social media.

#### *Protection*

27. The NFCC issued guidance on how to continue protection activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included maintaining a risk-based approach, completing desktop audits and issuing enforcement notices electronically. The service adopted this guidance. Among other activity, the service carried out audits on those premises that are at the greatest risk from fire.

28. The service reviewed how it defines premises as high risk during the pandemic. It focused on high-risk premises that stayed open, such as care homes, bed and breakfast businesses that had taken in homeless people, and hospitals. The service offered advice and guidance on its website.

29. The service stopped conducting the fire safety audits it would normally undertake. 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. It also introduced other measures to reduce social contact. For example, it used telephone calls to make the initial contact. It completed more desktop assessments. It used electronic documents to replace hard-copy letters, and offered better information on its website. Also, it gave staff appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE).

30. The service continued to issue alteration notices, enforcement notices and prohibition notices on a risk-based approach. It also continued to respond to statutory building control consultations.

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

31. The service gave some consideration to the wellbeing needs of staff. It introduced listening mates and wellbeing ambassadors. It also carried out surveys to check on staff wellbeing. But it could have done more to talk to staff about their needs, so that it could have helped them to identify and access the right support.

32. Most staff survey respondents told us that they could access services to support their mental wellbeing if needed. However, the service could have been clearer with staff about the range of wellbeing services available to them. The service is considering how it should plan for the potential longer-term effects of COVID-19 on its workforce.

33. More could have been done to identify and address the specific needs of staff members most at risk from COVID-19, including those from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background and those with underlying health problems. These members of staff didn't get the tailored support they may have needed.

34. 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.

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

36. The service provided its workforce with appropriate PPE in a timely manner. It bought PPE through the national fire sector scheme and local procurement mechanisms. This allowed the service to make sure it had the right PPE, enough resources and achieved value for money.

### *Staff absence*

37. Absences have decreased compared with the same period in 2019. The number of days/shifts lost due to sickness absence between 1 April and 30 June 2020 decreased by 35.4 percent compared with the same period in 2019.

38. 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 actions that staff should take if they have symptoms of COVID-19, and guidance about travelling abroad and quarantine. The policy also had a question-and-answer factsheet. Data was routinely collected on the numbers of staff either absent, self-isolating or working from home.

### *Staff engagement*

39. 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 correspondence with staff about wellbeing and health and safety by email, telephone and the internal newsletter 'Fire Matters'.

40. The service made use of email and social media when communicating with on-call staff during the pandemic.

41. The service intends to maintain some of the changes it has made to its ways of working in response to COVID-19, particularly the level of communication it has had with staff. But the service could have made more use of the technology available to communicate with staff in a way that felt more personal.

### **Working with others, and making changes locally**

42. 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.

43. The service carried out the following new activities: assisting vulnerable people; delivering PPE; packing/repacking food for vulnerable people; and providing training packages. The service was ready to help with transporting bodies and fitting face masks, but this wasn't requested of them.

44. 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.

45. The service consulted locally to implement the tripartite agreement with the FBU, the Fire Officers Association (FOA) and the Fire and Rescue Service Association (FRSA). The service could have done more to communicate with the representative bodies of non-operational staff, including UNISON, especially as their members were also undertaking additional responsibilities.

46. Most of the new work done by the service, including that under the tripartite agreement, was agreed on time for it to start promptly and in line with the request from the partner agency.

47. There were extra requests for work by partner agencies that fell outside the tripartite agreement. These included: doing wellbeing checks on vulnerable people; transporting people from hospital to their homes; carrying out safe and well checks; collecting prescriptions from pharmacies; delivering COVID-19 tests to test centres; and participating in the COVID marshal scheme. (The latter is a government programme, managed by the local authority, to educate and encourage communities to comply with COVID-19 restrictions.)

48. This work was agreed with the FRSA and FOA. The service asked staff to volunteer to carry out the work. The work was undertaken on time and in line with the request from the partner agency. This is described in more detail later in this report.

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

50. This work was carried out by the prevention team supported by on-call staff who were engaged on a separate contract of employment for this work.

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

#### *Local resilience forum*

52. 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 LRF. Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service is a member of Warwickshire LRF. At the start of the pandemic, the Warwickshire and West Midlands LRFs combined to form one LRF. The LRF told us that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government cited this as good practice.

53. The service was an active member of the combined Warwickshire and West Midlands LRF during the pandemic. The service told us that the LRF's arrangements enabled the service to be fully engaged and integrated in the multi-agency response.

54. As part of the LRF's response to COVID-19, the chief fire officer is deputy chair of the LRF. The service chaired a group that reported on excess deaths and supported the coroner. It also supported the police to help with social distancing in the retail sector. The service was able to allocate suitably qualified staff to participate in LRF activities without affecting its core duties.

#### **Use of resources**

55. The service's financial position hasn't yet been significantly affected by the pandemic.

56. The service, with support from the county council, has made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. At the time of our inspection its main extra costs were related to staff and PPE. It fully understands the effect these costs will have on its previously agreed budget and anticipated savings.

57. The service received extra government funding through the county council to support its response. At the time of our inspection, it spent this money on staff who volunteered to carry out additional work and PPE. In total, it spent approximately an additional £250,000. It has shown how it used this income efficiently, and that it mitigated against the financial risks that arose during this period.

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

#### *Ways of working*

59. The service changed how it operates during the pandemic. For example, it encouraged staff to work from home where possible. It had the necessary IT to support remote working. And the county council allocated £100 to every member of staff to spend on equipment to support homeworking.

60. The service could quickly implement changes to how it operates. This allowed its staff to work flexibly and efficiently during the pandemic. The service plans to consider how to adapt its flexible working arrangements to make sure it has the right provisions in place to support a modern workforce.

#### *Staffing*

61. 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.

62. The service could have made better use of the capacity of its wholetime firefighters. The service placed them in 'bubbles' to prevent transmission of the virus between staff and the community, and to make sure the service could continue to respond to fires and other emergencies. Prevention staff, and on-call firefighters who were offered additional contracts, carried out safe and well calls to vulnerable people. The service has recognised that it didn't make best use of its wholetime firefighters, who could also have supported this work. It has plans to change this approach in the future.

63. Work under the tripartite agreement was mainly done by non-operational staff supported by on-call staff on separate contracts. The service also took this approach because it wanted to make sure that wholetime firefighters were available to respond to incidents. The service had planning and training in place to use staff on stations for other tripartite activities which weren't requested.

## **Governance of the service's response**

64. 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.

65. Members of Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Authority were involved in discussions with the chief fire officer and the service on the service's ability to discharge its statutory functions during the pandemic. Members of the fire and rescue authority and the service maintained a constructive relationship.

66. During the pandemic, the fire and rescue authority reduced the level of oversight and scrutiny it gave the service. It temporarily suspended overview and scrutiny meetings. But there was more informal communication between the chief fire officer and the chair of the authority and fire authority members had access to the service's strategic and tactical command groups.

## **Looking to the future**

67. 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.

68. Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service has improved its collaboration with the police and other partners. It is looking at ways in which its workforce can support these organisations more permanently, especially during periods of heightened demand for those partners. The service wants to continue to increase its 'hospital to home' service. It wants to use its on-call staff more to support vulnerable people in the community. The service also plans to continue with remote working where this is more efficient and supports wellbeing. It also has plans to increase the staffing of its control room.

69. Good practice and what worked was shared with other services. By combining West Midlands and Warwickshire LRFs, the service was able to work and share information with more local partners. The service also shares a border with Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire fire and rescue services. This group regularly exchanges information. One example of this relates to developing the ability to support the coroner. Warwickshire County Council set up a working group that met every day. This included public health, the police and Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service. The service received accurate information from this group on the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths, and had access to wider information from the West Midlands region. The service was also able to share learning and information with the rest of the West Midlands, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and the Home Office.

**Next steps**

70. 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,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Wendy Williams", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.**Wendy Williams**

Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary