



Northumberland

County Council

COMMITTEE: COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: 3 MARCH 2021

TITLE: HMICFRS Covid-19 Inspection: Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service

Report of: Chief Fire Officer Paul Hedley

Cabinet Member: Cllr John Riddle Fire Authority Chair and Portfolio Holder for Community Services

Purpose of report

To provide an overview of the HMICFRS COVID-19 response inspection for Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service.

The full HMICFRS narrative assessment letter can be found [here](#).

Recommendations

Communities and Place OSC is recommended to:

- Note the content of the report;
- Provide comments on the covid19 response assessment from HMICFRS; and
- Community and Place OSC to invite further reports on progress against the recommendations provided by the HMICFRS as required.
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Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the 'Living' priority included in the NCC Corporate Plan 2018-2021.

Key issues

- A largely positive letter regarding Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Findings will be considered during HMICFRS' second round of inspections; and
- Fire and Rescue Services will be expected to build on new partnerships and new ways of working developed during the pandemic.

Background

1. Independent inspection of fire and rescue authorities in England – and the fire and rescue service they oversee – is delivered by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS). Inspectors have powers given to them by the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, as amended by the Policing and Crime Act 2017. An inspection programme and framework must be published, and all fire and rescue authorities must cooperate with the inspectorate and its inspectors to enable them to delivery their statutory function.
2. In addition to the inspection programme, HMICFRS may also be commissioned by the Home Office to undertake thematic inspections. In August 2020, HMICFRS was commissioned to inspect how fire and rescue services were responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Home Office requested that inspections considered the following:
 - What is working well and what is being learned;
 - How the fire sector is responding to the COVID-19 crisis.
 - How fire services are responding to the problems they face; and
 - What changes are likely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service was inspected 12 October to 16 October 2020, with the letter (or report) being published on 22 January 2021. Feedback was very positive, stating that the service adapted and responded to the pandemic effectively, providing support to both Northumberland County Council and the Local Resilience Forum.

Notable Areas of Comment

The following provides summary examples of the some of the notable narrative extracts from the HMICFRS findings letter.

1. Measures were taken to ensure the control room and fires stations remained available to respond to incidents. Overall availability was better during the pandemic than during the same period in the previous year, while sickness absences decreased by 24 percent as opposed to the same reference period in 2019.
2. Although inspectors asked direct questions around the productivity of wholetime firefighters (*see Letter para 10(c)*), reflecting a national question set, the context of Northumberland is of critical consideration. Should one wholetime watch have been required to self-isolate, this would have represented almost 10 percent of the total wholetime firefighting capability. While protecting the operational capability of the service, however, it is important to recognise that wholetime firefighters were still involved in the delivery of key community services where and when required. The service continued to provide fire prevention advice to the most vulnerable members of the community by adapting its approach. The service also continued to engage with businesses and, although inspectors felt it could have adopted National Fire

Chiefs Council guidance earlier in the pandemic, the service was able to introduce alternative methods of engagement.

3. HMICFRS inspectors found that staff wellbeing was a priority for the service and that we effectively identified those most at risk. HMICFRS made specific mention of the support put in place for staff included the adoption and use of the NCC personalised risk assessment approach for every member of staff, as well as a the ability to access a dedicated COVID helpline and email address provided via NCC.
4. .Senior leaders promoted wellbeing services and encouraged staff to discuss any worries they had. Staff survey respondents told inspectors they could access services to support their mental wellbeing if needed. It should be recognised that many of the wellbeing support arrangements were provided by Northumberland County Council, while being actively promoted by managers within the service, for instance the introduction of personal risk assessments, and a dedicated COVID-19 helpline.
5. Members of Northumberland Fire and Rescue Authority were actively engaged in discussions on the service's ability to discharge its statutory functions, and during the pandemic the fire and rescue authority continued to give the service proportionate oversight and scrutiny.
6. HMICFRS inspectors recognised that Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service was able to act quickly to new ways of working. It provided some examples of this:
 - a. Developing and building on relationships with local partners such as North East Ambulance Service;
 - b. Developing ways of communicating remotely with the public and to provide safety messages;
 - c. Delivery of online child and youth initiatives such as Prince's Trust *Team* Programme;
 - d. Delivering innovative ways to ensure businesses received the latest and best safety advice; and
 - e. Embracing technology to support regular and effective engagement with staff, such as on-call firefighters working in remote areas of the county.

HMICFRS Recommendations

In order to be as efficient and effective as possible, HMICFRS recommends Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service should focus on the following areas as it plans for the future:

- It should update its community risk profiles, both of people and premises, to take account of the changes the pandemic has caused. It should make sure that its prevention and protection activity remains focused on those areas at highest risk.
- It should determine what steps it needs to take to implement any future changes to the National Fire Chiefs Council's (NFCC's) guidance on protection in a timely manner.
- It should make sure wholetime firefighters are fully productive, while minimising the risk of them contracting or spreading the virus.

HMICFRS recommendations have been provided while recognising that managing the pandemic may continue for some considerable time.

Future HMICFRS Inspection

HMICFRS is starting its second round of inspections in spring 2021, with Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service included in the first tranche. Inspectors will follow up both Areas for Improvement identified during the first round of inspections, and findings identified in this Covid-19 thematic inspection.

Implications

Policy	Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service is reviewing policies to ensure that it continues to remain focused on those at highest risk.
Finance and value for money	The service has made robust and realistic calculations of the extra costs it has faced during the pandemic. At the time of inspection, the service had not used any of the council's reserves to meet extra costs that arose during the period considered.
Legal	Inspections have powers given to them by the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, and fire authorities must give due regard to reports and recommendations.
Procurement	The service participated in the national fire sector scheme to purchase PPE, which allowed it to achieve value for money.
Human Resources	N/A

Property	N/A
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	This report was produced by HMICFRS and therefore an Equality Impact Assessment has not been completed. An EIA will be completed for any new or amended policies produced as a result of this report.
Risk Assessment	N/A
Crime & Disorder	N/A
Customer Consideration	This report is written by HMICFRS for the public. It has been published on HMICFRS and Northumberland County Council websites.
Carbon reduction	N/A
Health and Wellbeing	HMICFRS letter states staff wellbeing was a clear priority for the service. Further details are provided in this report.
Wards	N/A

Background papers

[Responding to the pandemic: The fire and rescue service's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 – Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service](#)

Report sign off

Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:

	Full Name of Officer
Monitoring Officer/Legal	WT
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	CH
Relevant Executive Director	KA
Chief Executive	DL
Portfolio Holder(s)	JR

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