

Chief Fire Officer Darren Dovey
Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service

20 June 2019

Dear Darren,

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE REVISIT

We inspected Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service the week of 19 November 2018. During the inspection we identified the following causes of concern and shared these with the service:

- (a) We found that the service's fire engine availability is regularly less than the minimum number of engines you state that you need to provide fire cover to the public of Northamptonshire. We also found that the control room supervisor didn't routinely notify the officer on duty, as per the operational response mobilising policy. The service has no formal process to manage this situation when the officer on duty has been notified.
- (b) We also found that the service couldn't assure itself that its firefighters had all necessary safety critical skills required to respond to emergency incidents. We identified that training records on the central training database were out of date and that line managers weren't keeping competence records up to date.

2. You submitted an action plan setting out how you plan to address our areas of concern. The action plan included the following objectives and actions:

Objective 1

Ensure minimum fire cover is maintained, and consistent managerial action in response to reduced engine availability.

Actions:

- (a) Implement new standards of operational response (SOR) and fire cover model.
- (b) Confirm fire cover model and organisational response to engine availability.
- (c) Develop resilience arrangements to ensure minimum fire cover is maintained.
- (d) Review RDS (on-call) model to ensure fire cover is sustained.
- (e) Enhance performance information of engine availability.

Objective 2

Support station staff in the management of the maintenance of their competency framework, to ensure that computerised records are accurate and up to date.

Actions:

- (a) Implement a robust audit process that is linked with a centrally-directed training programme and prioritised on risk-critical competences.
 - (b) Publish policy and guidance that clarifies requirements and responsibilities for the management of the maintenance of competency framework.
 - (c) Ensure administration processes for recording of competence are effective.
 - (d) Implement a refresher training programme for the use of computerised records and maintenance of competencies.
 - (e) Training workstream leads to triangulate and audit computerised records information.
3. We revisited the service between 10 and 13 June 2019 to review progress against the action plan. We explored the following areas specified within the action plan:
- (a) what initial progress has been made; and
 - (b) whether the right levels of leadership and oversight were in place.
4. During the revisit we interviewed staff responsible for implementing the action plan. This included you as the chief fire officer. We also met the police, fire and crime commissioner (PFCC) for Northamptonshire, who had assumed governance of the fire and rescue service on 1 January 2019. We concluded the revisit by giving you and the PFCC feedback on our findings. Our findings are below:

Governance

5. We found appropriate governance arrangements in place to monitor progress against your action plan. The PFCC scrutinises action at his monthly accountability board. The service's senior leadership team also monitors progress at the monthly fire executive group, chaired by the chief fire officer. A member of the PFCC's senior team attends this meeting. Both causes of concern are now on the service's risk register, which is reviewed at the quarterly strategic risk register meeting, chaired by the chief fire officer.

Action plan

6. The service has detailed action plans covering our causes of concern. The action plans have senior responsible owners (SROs), deadlines and specific action owners. The chief fire officer recently restructured chief officer responsibilities which resulted in each assistant chief fire officer taking on a senior responsible officer role. They have set up monitoring processes and personally sign off actions when complete. We consider progress against the plans to be appropriate and that the minor delays in achieving some of the deadlines have clear reasons.
7. Since our inspection the PFCC has published a fire and rescue plan for 2019 to 2021. This commits the service to publishing minimum standards of operational response and consider new models of resourcing to best match demand, resource levels and risk. A new integrated risk management plan (IRMP) for 2019 to 2022 has been approved by the PFCC following public consultation. This includes a revised standard of responding to all incidents, on average within ten minutes. It also requires the availability of a minimum of 14 pumps at any time to give effective fire cover.
8. Senior staff said their understanding of both causes of concern had improved over the last six months with better performance data and management information. They believed this had assisted their decision making and enabled better oversight of progress. Improvements in staff and pump availability data has helped the service forecast the gaps that needed filling to improve its response. The use of a scorecard with information on competencies helps managers to better prioritise training and put in place actions to address gaps identified in critical safety skills.
9. Staff capacity to provide this information is a problem. Some of the computer systems used to store data are difficult to extract information to help understanding and enable analysis. This means staff spend considerable time searching databases to get information for managers. This is leading to delays in some information being made available. For example, performance data about the new response standard introduced in April 2019 has yet to be produced. The service should explore if it can allocate more resources to remedy this situation in the short term.

Fire cover action plan

10. In May 2019 the service published a revised policy for mobilising operational response. This included guidance for staff to help them decide which pumps to keep available if there was a shortfall in staff. Staff we spoke to in fire control who are responsible for mobilising engines welcomed this clarity and found it helpful, although it had only been used for two weeks at the time of our revisit.
11. The service has established an escalation process for informing senior staff about problems with pump availability. During office hours Monday to Friday, the resource management centre uses forecasting data and a 'bank' of firefighters and operational managers on overtime to fill gaps. Outside of these times, the nominated duty officer is alerted and required to address the shortfall.
12. Following consultation with representative bodies, the number of staff volunteering to be part of the 'bank' system has increased to over 100. This provides greater resilience for the process. It also increases the number of staff with the critical skills needed to improve availability, for example incident commanders and drivers.
13. The service describes the use of the 'bank' system as a temporary measure while it develops longer-term options. These options include a review of on-call staffing arrangements to provide a more sustainable model for the service. This significant piece of work is likely to take some time. Performance data provided by the service shows that during April and May 2019, the minimum number of pumps (14) were available only around 80 percent of the time. This level of cover should be available all of the time. The service reports that the interim 'bank' system is costing on average £30,000 per month. The service should consider whether to conduct a cost-benefit analysis to inform longer-term options.

Maintenance of competence action plan

14. The service issued new guidance on roles and responsibilities for recording competence on the training computer system. It supported this with briefing sessions for local managers at nearly all on-call stations. The service is about to brief all wholetime managers. Local managers are responsible for recording maintenance of competency training conducted at stations. The central training team conducts assessments and revalidation training, and keeps records of these.
15. The service made it mandatory for all training to be recorded on the service's training computer system. The central training team has done considerable work to make sure records previously held on other systems are now on this system. However, some work is still needed to ensure confidence in management information regarding competence.

16. The service has introduced quarterly audits of training and competence records conducted by station managers to ensure compliance with the new guidance. Also, the central training staff now have a role in the quality assurance process.
17. Chief officers review a maintenance of competency scorecard which is now produced by the service. Senior managers welcome this information, commenting that it assists them with better assurance of the process and decision making. For example, the information has helped managers reprioritise who attends certain training courses. This supports the fire cover action plan, as skills shortages were limiting availability. The training team welcomed the greater focus on recording, as it allowed it to target training where it is most needed.
18. The service recognised that some staff weren't up to date with safety-critical competencies, like incident command and use of breathing apparatus. We recognise the focus the service has placed on addressing this and we saw considerable improvement. For staff not yet competent, managers now review the case and decide if they can stay operational.

Outcome

19. The problems with fire cover and maintenance of competence we found during our inspection are serious. They create a risk for the public and firefighters. The availability of resources affects the effectiveness of the service's response to incidents. Ensuring staff have the required competencies to carry out their role is critical to their safety. We recognise the priority that the chief fire officer and his senior leadership team have placed on addressing these issues. We welcome the work carried out to improve this situation.
20. The service has detailed action plans which have senior responsible owners, deadlines and specific action owners. We found appropriate governance structures within the service and through the PFCC who scrutinise progress. We believe the service and its senior managers now have a better understanding of the problems, helped by better data. This helps decision making and allows for better monitoring.
21. In relation to fire cover, the service has issued new guidance on action in response to shortfalls in staffing that limit pump availability. There is an escalation process to make sure senior staff are informed and can help address problems. In addition, forecasting data enables the service to use 'bank' staff to fill identified gaps. The service is only achieving the minimum 14-pump level about 80 percent of the time. It is reviewing the on-call staffing system.

22. In relation to the maintenance of competencies, the service has issued new guidance and is in the process of briefing all managers. The service's training computer system now contains more accurate data on staff training and assessments. This is helping fill gaps in safety-critical competencies. The service also now has a process to review whether those not up to date with their competencies can stay operational.
23. Overall, we are encouraged by what we found on our revisit. Although the service has more to do in relation to both causes of concern, it has made significant improvements.
24. We will revisit Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service in spring 2020 to make sure it has made satisfactory progress with its action plan, and that the service it gives to the public of Northamptonshire continues to improve.

Yours sincerely,



Zoë Billingham

Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary

Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services