



HM Fire Service Inspectorate

Report to: Director for Safer Communities Scottish Government

Date: December 2020

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Subject: Update report on the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's planning and preparedness for COVID-19 (follow-up light touch review)

1. Purpose

This report has been provided by HM Chief Inspector of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to the Director for Safer Communities on behalf of the Scottish Government (SG). The report provides an update on the position that was reported on 8 April 2020, to provide assurance on the 'Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's (SFRS) plans and preparedness for COVID-19'(C-19).

In April the original review concluded Her Majesty's Fire Service Inspectorate (HMFSI) Scotland believes 'there is good evidence to support the SFRS strategic planning assumption and the necessary mitigation that will enable the Service to continue to deliver its statutory duties'.

This update reports on; Planning and Preparation, Opportunities and Organisational Learning and Working with Others.

Our work included reviewing all of the information and evidence originally provided by the SFRS as well as any documentation changes, scrutiny of minutes, decision and actions logs that were available. This information has been triangulated with phone calls and virtual meetings with staff at all levels of the SFRS management, Representative Bodies and Regional Resilience Partners. The information is current at the time of writing this report.

Throughout the report we have identified our findings using underlined italics and blue text to assist the reader.

1.1 Business Continuity Management (BCM)

1.1.1 The SFRS Business Continuity Management Plans (BCMPs) are based on best practice and guidance under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. Newly created documents specific to C-19 follow the same structure. Responsibility for BCMP's lies with Heads of Department for the maintenance, audit and exercising of their individual BCMPs, also working in conjunction with other department heads whose plans may have an interdependence.

1.1.2 There is evidence to show when and how BCMPs are exercised and the results of those tested. This includes BCMP within the Operations Control (OC) and its fall-back arrangement with Northern Ireland FRS. These arrangements were further tested during severe weather spate conditions on 12 August 2020 and Bonfire night. Not all BCMPs have been tested or require testing to provide assurance.

2. Background

2.1 On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared that the outbreak of a new coronavirus, C-19 constituted a public health emergency of international concern. There are many coronaviruses that are transmitted from human-to-human which are not of public health concern, however C-19, which is a new strain of the virus, that has not been previously identified in humans, can cause respiratory illness of varying severity. Infection rates across the whole of the UK have meant government health plans have needed to be updated routinely and the impact upon communities has ranged from partial to full lockdown. SG has constantly followed best practice and implemented a range of restrictions from Tier 0 to Tier 4.

2.1.1 The SFRS has been quick to update plans and supplement documentation with C-19 specific guidance for all staff.

2.1.2 The strategic aim of the SFRS during this pandemic is to maintain high standards of Service Delivery.

Specific objectives are to:

- Continue to operate efficiently and effectively during this period of uncertainty and disruption.
- Ensure that all areas of the Service are prepared and equipped to maintain Service Delivery safely, in the challenging conditions that may be presented.
- Balance the need for 'Public Health over Public Safety'.

3. Findings

3.1 Planning and Preparation

3.1.1 **Governance** – The SFRS has been quick to respond to the challenges of the current pandemic, the establishment of their governance arrangements aligns with the Scottish Co-ordination Advisory Framework (SCAF). The meeting frequencies of the various boards has been adjusted throughout the pandemic to meet the needs of the organisation and the impact upon service delivery. Information and updates are regularly shared with internal stakeholders in an open and transparent way.

3.1.2 In order to effectively manage the effects of C-19, the SFRS created a bespoke COVID-19 Tactical Action Group (COTAG). The group currently meets regularly, but stood down in the summer after the first wave of the virus and then up again as the second wave of C-19 became apparent. The COTAG Chair will be the direct link to the Scottish Government Liaison Officer (SGLO) should there be a need to brief SG directly. There are defined escalation processes and multiple ways to disseminate work, good governance ensures actions are monitored, recorded and dealt with at the most appropriate level.

3.1.3 COTAG continues to ensure that the SFRS operates efficiently and effectively, whilst maintaining a high standard of Service Delivery. It is responsible for establishing and closing down sub groups that ensure concurrent works is delivered. The sub groups include: PPE, Communications, Operational Availability, Exiting the EU, Mental Health & Well-being and a Recovery & Reset Group. A strategic manager chairs the Recovery & Reset Group, establishing this group at this early stage should enable returning to BAU, and will assist the SFRS to understand and evaluate those innovations and news ways of working developed during the pandemic.

3.1.4 **Use of physical resources** - Operational response crewing levels for whole-time appliances are normally maintained at 5 firefighters, with multi pump stations crewing at 5 for one appliance and 4 for each subsequent appliance. Due to the impact of C-19 and the need to reduce the risk of infection, bubbles/clusters of stations were formed, as it was recognised that it would be difficult to maintain crewing levels as agreed with Representative Bodies. Pragmatic discussions have led to whole time fire stations riding with a minimum of 4 firefighters, however we recognise that Representative Bodies are not supportive of maintaining these arrangements post C-19.

3.1.5 The SFRS has looked at the impact of staff shortages, and we are aware that recently retired staff in roles ranging from Firefighters, Flexi-Duty Officers and OC staff have been contacted to augment or supplement staff numbers if the need arises. This additional capacity may not be utilised but will form an additional level of resilience, all be it at an additional cost to the SFRS as a direct result of C-19.

3.1.6 Use of financial resources – the Finance team have been able to ‘tag’ spending that is attributed to C-19, this ensures the Service can look at the burden C-19 has had on its revenue expenditure. The Finance team monitor spending variances and this will inform future forecast spending. Underspends are currently being noted in overtime and training as these are areas immediately impacted upon by C-19. It is recognised these are not clear savings as there may be a need in the future to increase the training provision to catch up on skills fade and specialist training that has been directly affected.

3.2 Organisational Learning and Opportunities

3.2.1 Organisational Learning - The organisation has had to adapt to the quick changing operating environment that has emerged during the C-19 pandemic and recognises the need to be agile and prompt in its decision making. The benefits of streamlined bureaucracy and speed of decision making has been acknowledged at many levels.

Commanders and managers are keen to maintain this agility, although are cognisant of the need to maintain proper accountability and scrutiny.

3.2.2 It was identified there were times when the SFRS commanders were unclear or unable to commit the SFRS resources when working with partners within Local Resilience Partnerships (LRPs), many needing to escalate to a higher level of authority, although there were no detrimental impacts reported, the potential does exist.

The SFRS should ensure there is clear decision making and authority to commit resources with those representing the Service.

3.2.3 As with other public bodies forced to restrict its workforce from operating normally, the SFRS has been quick to have non-station based staff work from home (WFH). The speed in which it has been able to adopt WFH is very positive, as is its ability to procure technology/devices to assist home working. This is recognised by Representative Bodies as a positive contribution to reducing staff disruption. We are advised that WFH and greater work flexibility will be included in future documents of the SFRS HR plans.

The WFH arrangements need to be evaluated as it is too early to be assured of the longer term consequences of this new way of working.

3.2.4 Not all staff in the SFRS have been able to WFH, operational whole-time fire crews have been working from fire and rescue stations, and we were pleased to see a number of arrangements adopted that are designed to reduce the risk of contamination and spread of the virus in the workplace.

3.2.5 The three OC sites (Edinburgh, Johnstone and Dundee) were recognised early as a significant point of failure and management were quick to make these workspaces sterile areas. The result is that there has been limited impact to the functionality of the emergency call management arrangements in the SFRS.

3.2.6 Fire and rescue stations have been working to ensure they are C-19 secure. The complexities of the 24 hours duty systems is such that it is extremely difficult to have completely C-19 safe spaces. The need to respond to emergency incidents has meant the risk control measures are often unable to be implemented as desired. Unfortunately, a number of staff on fire and rescue stations have been tested positive for C-19 or have been affected by Test and Protect. The need to self-isolate has at times impacted the whole station leading to appliances being unavailable. Management has utilised the appliance withdrawal policy to manage and minimise the impact of the down time. The withdrawal of appliance policy plans for the loss of appliances down through 4 tiers of attrition to a minimum 30% level.

3.2.7 During the early stages of the pandemic, it was reported that protective equipment was in short supply. This was not unique to the SFRS. We are aware that the original planning assumptions to hold 3 months stock of protective equipment has been reviewed and the SFRS will now be storing 6 months stock of some supplies.

3.2.8 All staff groups are well supported with a range of occupational and mental health provisions. We received no negative comments from Representative Bodies on welfare arrangements, however we understand that there are different levels of anxiety across the various staff groups.

3.2.9 Service wide communications was initially very challenging with messages being amended daily. The volume of information being disseminated has led to many staff raising concerns of information overload and fatigue. The rapidly changing environment meant it was difficult to ensure consistency of early messages, this may have impacted upon staff confidence and personal vulnerabilities about their security and safety. It has been universally recognised that the introduction of task cards reduced the volume of information and gave managers a consistent set of priorities leading to less variance in decision making. The CFO Blogs were also mentioned as providing assurance, information and engagement.

3.2.10 Training and exercising has been significantly affected by C-19. Training is restricted to risk critical areas of business and multi-agency training beyond virtual training has ceased. The use of remote training/learning is being used but it acknowledged that most staff benefit from practical and where possible 'real environment' training. The SFRS recognises that skill fade is inevitable and will impact on RDS/Volunteers and specialist staff more than whole-time staff.

The SFRS should ensure a training needs analysis of all areas of training is undertaken, and that a plan is developed to ensure specialist skills such as water rescue and rope rescue is in place to prevent long term risk to staff and communities.

3.2.11 **Opportunities** - the pandemic provides a unique set of circumstance for creativity, innovation and to push forward/test new ways of working, in all business areas including operational response. The availability of staff to crew appliances along with the introduction of bubbles/clusters has meant that normal crew levels cannot always be achieved, and reduced crewing across more areas of the business have been forced upon the Service. We are aware that the Representative Bodies are not fully supportive of the changes to crewing levels going forward, however the opportunity this time period affords the SFRS to review its long term crewing arrangements should not be missed as it may assist dealing with future pressures. *The impact of these changes should be evaluated by the SFRS to identify potential organisational benefits and risks.*

3.2.12 Unwanted Fire Alarm Signals (UFAS) continues to be the SFRS's largest area of demand and its inclusion in the national framework as a key reduction priority for the Service. A number of changes to pre-determined attendance models have been utilised during this period, and we understand that the SFRS Senior Leadership Team are considering a number of proposals that will reduce the total number of UFAS calls to be attended. We would expect that the evidence collected during this period will inform decision making and will provide communities with the assurance of future risks. This is an opportunity for evidence based change that may not have been achieved if we were not living with C19.

The SFRS should look at amending the UFAS arrangements to reduce levels of demand, utilising evidence to inform any decision making.

3.2.13 The Service development programme is utilising maps and data overlays to identify risk, demand and levels of fire cover. The work of this group could influence future resource allocation.

The SFRS should use evidence and data to ensure resources are utilised in the most efficient and effective way.

3.2.14 We are aware of a number of new innovative and creative ways of working including;

- Fire Safety enforcement visits being undertaken remotely.
- Delivery of training and assessment within OC and at fire and rescue stations reducing the need for staff to travel and delays in getting staff competent.
- Some low and medium Community Safety activities (HFSV) are being delivered virtually.

New ways of working should be thoroughly evaluated to maximise opportunities to deliver better service

3.2.15 The use of technology and the infrastructure to support it will need to be improved, especially in the rural communities to ensure all the SFRS staff are able to benefit and deliver quality service. The speed of broadband connections is not in the control of the SFRS. It is evident that the benefits of using technology in the future will become more BAU.

The SFRS should ensure that the more rural parts of the country are not deprived of investment as these are areas that will assist the organisation increase performance.

3.2.16 Throughout the current pandemic the Service has developed a number of bespoke plans, many are for concurrent events that are needed for business continuity. It has been acknowledged that some planning assumptions did not materialise and 'what was expected to happen did not'. The plans create a significant management workload and the SFRS is considering if future plans may be designed as frameworks providing guidance on outcomes or consequence management. This may be more suitable and may reduce the volume of documentation that staff need to digest, and the amount of management time to keep this updated.

The SFRS may wish to consider future plans being designed as frameworks providing guidance on outcomes or consequence management.

3.3 Working with Others

3.3.1 **Engagement** - Internal stakeholders/Representative Bodies acknowledge the positive way in which the 'Working Together Framework' has ensured effective joint working, weekly meetings with a Principal Officer as a troubleshooting forum is seen to have worked well. Sharing of decision logs and joint problem solving at a strategic level has also been welcomed. However, there are areas of potential duplication, the briefing of different groups separately is an inefficient use of time that could lead to delays in information exchange, action and decisions.

3.3.2 Partners representing Regional and Local Resilience Partnerships (RRP/LRPs) have been pleased with the level of engagement and participation of the SFRS management. This is true at regional and local levels. The SFRS staff have chaired or co-chaired partnership meetings and have been active in meeting community requests for support. It must be noted that not all areas required or sought assistance from the SFRS, as much of the 'heavy lifting' was done by the Local Authority (LA) and NHS health boards.

3.3.3 Partners commented that C-19 has placed the SFRS in a less central/pivotal role and a more passive position than it normally would occupy. This is an unnatural role for the fire service and lessons may be learnt on how they can support others going forward.

3.3.4 Partners recognise the difficulties that national organisations like the SFRS have in planning especially when boundaries are not coterminous. C-19 has identified that some additional challenges have appeared in areas where the SFRS delivery areas are not aligned with the LA or NHS health boards.

These challenges need to be fully understood to ensure there is no negative impacts.

3.3.5 Multi-agency training is of significant importance to all, as it ensures agencies are able to operate effectively, responding to the most major incidents that have greatest community impact. Learning from other significant incidents has shown weakness in decision making, communications and information sharing.

Partners and the SFRS should ensure that plans are developed to re-instate joint training without delay when circumstances permit.

3.3.6 We are pleased to hear that the SFRS has utilised the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) and Kent FRS for access to procurement and other framework opportunities. The provision of new firefighting PPE from this route has enhanced organisational resilience in this area and should demonstrate value for money.

3.3.7 **Meeting local needs** – The SFRS continues to work in partnership with LA partners and communities on the core functions of prevention, protection and response to improve the safety and wellbeing of the most vulnerable people throughout Scotland. In order to effectively deliver the strategic plans and specific objectives during the crisis, the SFRS has a principle governance body COTAG leading this work.

3.3.8 As part of the NHS response to C-19 a temporary emergency critical care hospital has been designed and set up. The NHS Louisa Jordan hospital is based at the Scottish Events Campus (SEC) in Glasgow. The SFRS were able to provide specialist Fire Safety advice and developed plans to ensure that the additional risks of this facility were mitigated. The Service will dedicate fire cover provisions from the nearby fire station if the hospital is ‘stood up’.

3.3.9 The Community Resilience Action Group (CRAG) was utilised to support calls for assistance and there are examples of support from the SFRS in delivery of prescriptions, food supplies, storage of PPE and sites for C-19 testing. However, staff were not utilised in a consistent way across Scotland, which was in part due to differing requests from partners and the availability of other agencies to provide support. This has meant the SFRS has not had the same public profile as other agencies responding to C-19.

3.3.10 It was evident that the ‘tripartite’ agreements between the NFCC, Fire Brigades Union and Local Government Association were not utilised. Many staff had little awareness of the agreements, nor did we find evidence that the SFRS were influencing or was an active participant in those discussions. The NFCC were active in reporting the impact of C-19 on the fire sector, the areas reported on include; levels of demand, infection rates and absenteeism etc.

The SFRS appear not to have been participative which may have assisted monitoring and anticipating the impact of C-19.

3.3.11 **Community Asset Register (CAR).** We found that these assets were not utilised. It was evident that accessing the assets is an issue, as is the maintaining the list of resources available. The SFRS host the CAR and it is acknowledged that the SFRS are not the owners of the resources, failure to utilise the capacity and capability of the resources available is inefficient.

The SFRS should work with partners to seek how the CAR assets can be accessed and deployed, and if a national, regional or more local alignment may maximise their usage.

3.3.12 Early planning with partners identified the potential increase in the levels of demand placed upon Scottish Ambulance Service (SAS), this could affect their attendance at incidents attended by the SFRS. It is pleasing to note that the interim arrangements for the SFRS to continue to operate in the interest of any casualties is at the centre of the planning assumption.

3.3.13 Agencies recognise that the use and utilisation of technology will be central to BAU. It was raised that the digital platforms used by partners were not always compatible leading to some partners not being able to engage and contribute.

The SFRS should work with partners to identify interoperability issues and work together to remove potential barriers.

3.3.14 The SFRS continues to be committed to collaboration with all stakeholders in sharing information, good practice and preventative measures which have a positive impact on the organisation and the communities they serve.

3.3.15 We challenged senior managers in the SFRS on the evidence presented to ensure the delivery of an effective operational response, and were given assurances that the comprehensive planning and procedures produced are suitable and sufficient.

4. Conclusions

4.1 A desktop review of the original and updated documentation, data, supporting evidence and virtual interviews was undertaken with staff at all levels within the SFRS, Representative bodies and Regional Resilience Partners to provide assurance on behalf of the SG.

The original review concluded HMFSI Scotland believes there is good evidence to support the SFRS strategic planning assumption, and the necessary mitigation that will enable the Service to continue to deliver its statutory duties.

This updated report supports the continued good practice within the SFRS, ensuring statutory duties and strategic objectives are achieved. We also believe that the SFRS should utilise our findings and the opportunities identified to further enhance and improve their effectiveness and efficiency.

A summary of the key findings are:

- 3.2.1 *Commanders and managers are keen to maintain this agility, although are cognisant of the need to maintain proper accountability and scrutiny.*
- 3.2.2 *The SFRS should ensure there is clear decision making and authority to commit resources with those representing the Service.*
- 3.2.3 *The WFH arrangements need to be evaluated as it is too early to be assured of the longer term consequences of this new way of working.*
- 3.2.10 *The SFRS should ensure a training needs analysis of all areas of training is undertaken, and that a plan is developed to ensure specialist skills like water rescue and rope rescue is in place to prevent long term risk to staff and communities.*
- 3.2.11 *The impact of these changes should be evaluated by the SFRS to identify potential organisational benefits and risks.*
- 3.2.12 *The SFRS should look at amending the UFAS arrangements to reduce levels of demand, utilising evidence to inform any decision making.*
- 3.2.13 *The SFRS should use evidence and data to ensure resources are utilised in the most efficient and effective way.*
- 3.2.14 *New ways of working should be thoroughly evaluated to maximise opportunities to deliver better service.*
- 3.2.15 *The SFRS should ensure that the more rural parts of the country are not deprived of investment as these are areas that will assist the organisation increase performance.*
- 3.2.16 *The SFRS may wish to consider future plans being designed as frameworks providing guidance on outcomes or consequence management*
- 3.3.4 *These challenges need to be fully understood to ensure there is no negative impacts.*
- 3.3.5 *Partners and the SFRS should ensure that plans are developed to re-instate joint training without delay, when circumstances permit.*
- 3.3.10 *The SFRS appear not to have been participative which may have assisted monitoring and anticipating the impact of C-19.*
- 3.3.11 *The SFRS should work with partners to seek how the CAR assets can be accessed and deployed and if a national, regional or more local alignment may maximise their usage.*
- 3.3.13 *The SFRS should work with partners to identify interoperability issues and work together to remove potential barriers.*

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