

**Independent National Evaluation of the Fire and Rescue Service Response to the Early
Phases of the Covid-19 Pandemic**

Dr Sara Waring, Isobel Bryce, Maisie Inns, Claire Lister, and Gabrielle Stewart

University of Liverpool
Department of Psychological Sciences

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1. FOREWORD

This report should be viewed by the reader as an addendum to the first report [Fire and rescue service response to COVID-19: Report for the NFCC COVID-19 Committee] developed rapidly during the early stages of the pandemic. The original report sought to inform the reader of notable practices whilst identifying things to avoid and approaches that didn't work that well, as a precursor to any future spikes in transmission levels.

This report and the associated narrative strengthen our understanding and draws out key learning which will inform future actions.

The report draws on the strength of the fire and rescue service and demonstrates the role that Services have undertaken and importantly can undertake in the future. The support provided with regards to mass testing and mass vaccination evidencing further the work and capabilities of the sector.

As we move into a period of recovery it is vital that this learning informs the reform of the fire and rescue service, maximising its potential to assist during a crisis no matter what the circumstances.

With that in mind I am assured that the implementation of the recommendations will lead to improved outcomes for our communities.

The National Fire Chief's Council and our partners are very grateful to everyone who has contributed to the learning. Only by celebrating the positives whilst exploring our areas for improvement do we ever truly learn.

In closing we would like to record our thanks to everyone working across the fire and rescue service, in whatever role, for their unswerving commitment to the public during one of the most demanding times we will ever face – you were and continue to be amazing.

CFO Phil Garrigan
NFCC Fire Gold Covid 19

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between July and September 2020, interviews were conducted with 47 chief fire officers (or their equivalents) from across the UK to gather their perspectives on how the fire and rescue service (FRS) had responded to the early phases of the pandemic. In December 2020, Catherine Levin, Jim Owen and Sara Waring published a report based on notes taken during these interviews to provide initial feedback, which is available on the [NFCC website](#). This initial report is detailed and presents a comprehensive set of recommendations.

The following report is not intended to replace the initial report, but rather to complement it. This report should be viewed as a follow-up to the original work that is based on a systematic analysis of fully transcribed interviews. The purpose of doing this is to ensure that all the themes that were most frequently noted by chief fire officers (CFOs) have been identified, and to consider whether similarities and differences in perspectives exist across governance structures, different sized FRSs, and geographical locations.

Findings are broken down into three sections relating to i) what worked well, ii) what hindered effectiveness, and iii) key learning.

What worked well

Overall, analysis highlighted the following seven common themes raised by CFOs in relation to aspects of response that worked well:

- Workforce adaptability – how well the workforce had adapted to alternative ways of working.
- Rapid response – how quickly services had been able to implement strategies to adapt to challenges and create new ways of working to reduce the spread of infection and keep staff safe.
- Motivation – how motivated the service and its staff had been to provide support to their local communities and partner agencies in responding to the pandemic.
- Partnerships – how well FRSs had worked with partner agencies to provide a range of support.
- Mutual Aid – the importance of mutual support across FRSs, for example in sourcing personal protective equipment (PPE).
- National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) – how beneficial the role of the NFCC had been in providing national strategic coordination of the FRS response to the pandemic, including sharing guidance and best practice and negotiation of the tripartite agreement (TPA).
- Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) – the important role that LRFs had provided in coordinating local support activities across partner agencies and how FRSs had played a significant role in leading and supporting the multi-agency response that was coordinated by LRFs.

Many of these themes were commonly noted across most CFOs, including workforce adaptability, rapid response, motivation, and partnerships. Comments relating to mutual aid tended to be made by large FRSs in the South of England. Comments relating to the NFCC

tended to be made by CFOs from small to medium sized FRSs in the North and South of England. Comments relating to LRFs tended to be made by CFOs from both the North and South of England operating in Combined, County or Metropolitan governance structures.

What hindered effectiveness

Overall, analysis highlighted the following eight common themes raised by CFOs in relation to factors that hindered response effectiveness or challenges that arose due to the pandemic:

- Tripartite agreement – how delays in negotiating agreements had delayed and restricted support provided to partner agencies, with some raising concerns about Fire Brigade Union approach during a pandemic.
- Government communication – information was often only shared with emergency services at the same time as the public, leaving them on the back foot, and mixed messages and changes in national guidance at short notice caused confusion.
- Wellbeing – concerns about staff wellbeing because of strains being placed on them due to health concerns, adapting to different ways of working, juggling home-schooling, and workload.
- Level of support provided – questions were raised regarding whether FRSs had provided as much support as possible, with the effectiveness of LRFs in coordinating support requests being noted as a key factor.
- NFCC guidance – was useful but the amount of guidance being shared from different national and local sources, some of which conflicted, created confusion for some and difficulties in identifying which information was most pertinent.
- Risk assessment – the amount of time and effort required to oversee the development of new risk assessments.
- ICT issues – the uniqueness of the situation had required FRSs to overhaul ways of working and technology rapidly, taking time away from other planned priorities, and some technical issues arose.
- PPE – although no FRS reported running out of PPE, comments indicated difficulties in gaining access to PPE in the very early phase of the pandemic, and inconsistencies in access across FRSs.

Some of these challenges were commonly noted across most CFOs, including the tripartite agreements (although there were variations in how this was dealt with), government communication, and wellbeing. Comments relating to NFCC guidance, risk assessment, and PPE tended to be made by small and medium sized FRSs. Comments relating to level of support provided tended to be made by CFOs operating in NIFRS Board, Combined, and County and Unitary governance structures.

Key learning

Overall, analysis indicated the following seven themes in relation to areas of key learning for future events of national significance:

- Flexible working – staff had shown themselves to be a reliable, trustworthy, and adaptable workforce, which was encouraging CFOs to maintain and pursue more flexible working moving forward.

- Partnerships – the importance of maintaining the relationships that had been developed and strengthened with partner agencies but adopting more localised approaches to support in future as needs differ across regions.
- Communicating information – how important it was to share relevant information regularly and in a timely manner, and in a way that was easy to understand, including government communications, communications with staff, and partner agencies.
- Risk assessment planning – the importance of learning from the development of risk assessments during the early phases of the pandemic to improve planning for future events of national significance.
- Adaptability of roles – during the pandemic, FRSs had shown their ability to step up and provide a range of support to partner agencies and CFOs wanted this momentum to continue.
- NFCC role – how well placed the NFCC are to serve a leading role in emergency planning, managing concerns nationally, communication with the Home Office, and distributing guidance and advice, but consideration in how this is done to avoid overwhelming people with information.
- Tripartite agreement – the need to adopt a more localised approach to forming agreements for supporting partner agencies to increase agility. Comments indicate that the original intention of the tripartite agreement had been to provide National Strategic Tactical Guidance that could be locally implemented but that the Fire Brigade Union had resisted this local flexibility. Further focus is needed to reconcile this.

Many of these themes were noted by most CFOs, including flexible working, partnerships, adaptability of roles, tripartite agreements, and the importance of effective information communication. Comments relating to risk assessment planning and the NFCC tended to be made by small and medium sized FRSs.

Where themes have not been consistently mentioned by CFOs across all governance structures, FRS sizes, or geographical regions, this may indicate organisational and contextual differences in how FRSs responded to the pandemic, what worked well and the challenges that arose in these contexts. However, it is also possible that themes are relevant to all FRSs but that some CFOs omitted mentioning all aspects of their response that worked well and all the barriers and challenges that arose during interview. Nevertheless, findings provide an evidence base for informing discussions about what mechanisms are important for promoting an effective response to public health crises of national significance.

3. BACKGROUND

In July 2020, acting on behalf of the NFCC, Phil Garrigan¹ and Andy Bell² commissioned Sara Waring to conduct an independent evaluation of i) the fire and rescue service (FRS) response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and ii) the NFCC strategic coordination of this response. This work is set to continue until January 2022, with findings being published across four reports.

The evaluation is being conducted using a realist approach, which seeks to identify “*what works, for whom, in what respects, to what extent, in what contexts, and how?*”³. This is important because despite operating under the same national guidance, organisational variations exist between FRSs and the local contexts in which they operate. One approach to pandemic response is not necessarily equally appropriate or feasible for all. The evaluation will focus on examining processes to understand how activities were implemented, outcomes achieved, and challenges overcome. We draw on multiple sources of both qualitative and quantitative data to cross verify findings and present a robust evidence base that can inform practise, including interviews with CFOs and stakeholders⁴, and the NFCC Data Hub⁵.

The first of the four evaluation reports, produced by Catherine Levin, Jim Owen and Sara Waring in December 2020, is available on the [NFCC website](#). It was based on interviews conducted with 47 CFOs (or their equivalent) and 10 stakeholders⁴ between July and September 2020. During interviews, CFOs were asked about their initial response to the pandemic, including i) what worked well, ii) barriers that got in the way or limited effectiveness, and iii) key learning. Variations in perspectives were noted across CFOs, which we suggested may partly be due to organisational and contextual differences in:

- Governance structure and responsibilities of CFOs in each structure, with County FRSs more inclined towards county council direction, whereas devolved administration FRSs were inclined towards direction from the devolved administration.
- The size of the FRS, with smaller FRSs generally glad of the support provided by nationally negotiating a Tripartite Agreement (TPA), especially regarding risk assessments. Others felt the TPA met the needs of larger FRSs with larger Fire Brigade Union memberships.

Insights contained within the first report are valuable, but the short timescales required for delivering initial feedback meant they were based on notes taken during interviews rather than fully transcribed accounts. Accordingly, this second report presents a more rigorous and systematic analysis of fully transcribed interviews to ensure that all prevalent themes are identified and to examine whether variations in perspectives exist between different governance structures, sizes of FRS, and geographical regions. Findings are important for informing discussions about how best to strike a balance in developing guidance for responding to future events of national significance that takes into consideration contextual differences in FRSs.

¹ CFO Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service, NFCC COVID-19 Committee Lead

² AC London Fire Brigade, NFCC COVID-19 Recovery Lead

³ Pawson, R. & Tilley, N. (1997). *Realistic Evaluation*. Sage.

⁴ Including representatives from the Home Office, Ambulance Service, National Employers, and unions

⁵ Where regions gave permission for data from the Data Hub to be accessed by the evaluation team.

4. METHOD

The 47 CFO interviews were transcribed and broken down into responses relating to the following three key areas: i) What worked well; ii) what hindered effectiveness; and iii) key learning for future events of national significance.

Transcripts were analysed using a qualitative analysis program called 'Leximancer' (<https://info.leximancer.com>). This automatic text analysis tool adopts a similar approach to traditional content analysis⁶, systematically and objectively analysing the underlying meaning within the qualitative data (Leximancer, 2009). Leximancer was used to identify the themes that were discussed most frequently across all interviews in relation to what worked well, what hindered effectiveness, and future learning. Next, comparisons were made between interviews to identify similarities and differences in CFO perspectives across different:

- Governance structures (combined, county and unitary, metropolitan, PFCC, board, mayoral).
- FRS sizes (1-20 stations, 21-30 stations, 31-40 stations, 41-50 stations, 51+ stations).
- Geographical regions (Northwest, Northeast, East Midlands, West Midlands, Southwest, Southeast, East Anglia, North Wales, South Wales, Northern Ireland, Isle of Man, Isles of Scilly).

⁶ A research technique that quantifies and analyses the presence, meanings and relationships of words, themes, or concepts in qualitative data to identify patterns.

5. FINDINGS

Findings are broken down into three sections: i) what worked well; ii) what hindered response effectiveness; and iii) key learning. Within each section, discussions highlight which themes were commonly discussed across CFOs and which themes were discussed by particular governance structures, FRS sizes, and geographical regions. How frequently each concept was discussed across interviews is provided but it is important to note that a higher frequency count does not necessarily denote importance. Some concepts may have been mentioned less frequently but CFOs went into more detail about this issue, whilst other concepts may have been mentioned frequently but with minimal depth of discussion.

5.1 WHAT WORKED WELL

Table 1 shows the seven key features that CFOs identified as promoting an effective initial response to the pandemic. Table 2 highlights which themes were commonly noted by most CFOs, and which were noted in specific governance structures, sized FRSs, or geographic regions. Most commented on rapidly responding to initial threats, workforce motivation, and ability to adapt to new and flexible ways of working. In contrast, a smaller number of CFOs commented on the effectiveness of LRFs for supporting coordinated responses, the valuable role the NFCC played in coordinating the strategic response, and how important mutual support between FRSs had been. This may indicate organisational or contextual differences in how FRSs responded to the pandemic, what worked well within different settings, or some CFOs omitted mentioning all features of their response that worked well. Further details about each theme are provided below with quotes to support.

Table 1. Themes identified in relation to what worked well

Theme	Frequency of comments
Workforce Adaptability	455
Rapid Response	332
Motivation	318
Mutual Aid	220
Partnerships	204
NFCC	125
LRFs	79

A. WORKFORCE ADAPTABILITY

All CFOs discussed how well their workforces had responded to the pandemic. This included maintaining good operational availability, with some CFOs even suggesting this was higher than pre-pandemic. Comments indicate this was the result of having fewer COVID-related staff absences than anticipated due to safety measures adopted, and on-call firefighters making themselves more available to work shifts, particularly those furloughed from their primary employment. CFOs also noted how adaptable support staff had been in learning to work from home, including using new technologies (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Zoom) and adopting new ways of working remotely. CFOs recognised that this had been a substantial

challenge, especially for those also juggling home schooling. Indeed, comments suggested that non-uniformed staff were quicker to adapt and took on more diverse roles than uniformed staff in many services. Overall, CFOs felt that their staff had shown flexibility and resilience, which were essential attributes for responding to dynamic, risky, and uncertain events such as a pandemic.

“Staff willingness to get involved and wanting to help is a real credit to the service.”

“Our availability went up as probably most peoples did.”

“Our staffing levels have been really high.”

“[home working] worked well in terms of looking after people and in terms of infection control.”

B. RAPID RESPONSE

Linked to the concept of workforce adaptability, all CFOs commented on how rapidly their service adapted to challenges presented by the pandemic. Comments focused on the ability of the service to quickly implement strategies for alternative ways of working to keep staff safe and reduce the spread of the virus, including working from home where possible and implementing new technologies to support this, forming crew bubbles, scaling back non-essential functions to prioritise frontline delivery, and standing down face-to-face prevention and protection activities. In large part, CFOs felt these strategies had been implemented so well because of the ‘can do’ attitude of their workforce, and that adopting them had successfully limited COVID-19 infections and the number of staff needing to self-isolate.

CFOs also noted how important it had been to rapidly set up a command-and-control structure to establish clear roles and responsibilities for managing the new risks presented by COVID-19. Some had quickly set up dedicated cells, including information and PPE cells, to coordinate activities and support monitoring and decision making. Many noted the importance of ensuring regular communication with staff right from the very beginning to keep them informed and make them feel supported, including podcasts, updates on the staff intranet, regular management briefings to explain how to use guidance and support staff, and town hall style meetings for answering staff questions and addressing concerns.

“We were able to move quickly so I don’t think there were any great barriers.”

“We started to isolate our fire stations and looking at other strategies for managing response very quickly.”

“Very early on we established a command-and-control structure, which was really efficient and gave a clear focus on roles and responsibilities.”

C. MOTIVATION

All CFOs noted feeling proud of how motivated their workforce had been to undertake additional activities to support their communities and partner agencies in responding to the pandemic. They believed the service had shown it could be trusted to provide a diverse range of support to deal with future dynamic events of national significance.

“Everyone has been prepared to go the extra mile in almost every situation and I think that’s incredible to watch and it’s an outstanding demonstration of the way the British Fire service can respond to emergencies.”

“It was a fantastic opportunity for the fire and rescue service to step into different areas and show how flexible and adaptable we can be.”

“We’ve seen the sector do what it does best and that’s step up when the need is there.”

D. PARTNERSHIPS

CFOs frequently commented on the importance of an effective partnership approach for responding to the pandemic, with agencies being willing and able to cooperate and support one another. Comments indicated that partnerships between the FRS, ambulance, police, and local councils worked particularly well where there were strong pre-established relationships built on trust and experience of working together prior to the pandemic. Where agencies were familiar with and trusted one another, they were more willing to request support and to have a better understanding of the types of support that could potentially be provided by the FRS. Examples of additional activities undertaken in the early phases of the pandemic by FRSs included driving ambulances, setting up temporary mortuary facilities and transporting those who had passed away outside of a health setting.

“A coordinated approach to partnership working across generally the blue light services.”

“We’ve done a lot of collaboration with joint services.”

“Strategic and tactical meetings are useful, and it means they’re very joined up. That worked really well.”

“There was a feeling of coming together, and partnership across partners of the County Council.”

“It’s the strength in partnership.”

E. MUTUAL AID

CFOs from large FRSs in the South of England and those operating under County or Mayoral governance structures noted how valuable the mutual aid between FRSs was for promoting an effective response. This included FRSs with better access to PPE providing support to other regions and providing support in negotiating the tripartite agreement. They felt teamwork within and between FRSs had been essential for promoting local and national response, with parties being willing to request and provide support when needed. They indicated the importance of having formal platforms for coordinating this, such as the NFCC.

“We had really good NFCC support in obtaining some additional PPE when county was struggling.”

“We provided an immense amount of support to [location name] in terms of making sure they had a quick store of PPE.”

“Having that level of professional support was of significance during this particular period, the fact there was a body like the NFCC for us to go to gain guidance was really helpful.”

“Regional chiefs and LRFs are in regular contact, looking to support each other.”

F. NFCC

Comments relating to the useful role the NFCC served in coordinating the national response to the pandemic tended to be made by CFOs from small to medium sized FRSs in the North and South of England, or those operating in Combined, County and Mayoral governance structures. Many of these CFOs highlighted the bespoke nature of this command structure the NFCC provided and that this strategic oversight had been beneficial for signposting guidance, sharing information, advice, good practice, and coordinating access to PPE. In effect, the NFCC provided an important single point of contact. Others noted the role the NFCC played in negotiating the tripartite agreement, which they found beneficial in shaping local conversations with the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) regarding activities that firefighters would undertake to support partner agencies. All welcomed the introduction and regularity of the Covid updates introduced to ensure risks were mitigated and information shared.

“We had a lot of interaction with the NFCC, and the communication was probably on a daily basis initially.”

There was guidance coming down from the NFCC and they landed really well.”

“It was really beneficial to have the consistent guidance.”

“The guidance was really helpful, particularly when you’re looking at whether we stop doing prevention work.”

“The guidance in the strategic intention. The NFCC have been really useful to me when I’ve been having my conversations with the FBU locally.”

G. LOCAL RESILIENCE FORUMS

Comments relating to the key role that LRFs had played in facilitating effective partnership approaches were particularly prevalent in CFOs from small or larger FRSs in the East of England, or those operating in Combined, County or Metropolitan governance structures. Effective communication within LRFs was noted as being very important for coordinating requests and offers for support across partner agencies. These CFOs indicated that a key factor in how well their LRFs had worked during the early phases of the pandemic was the strong pre-existing relationships, which had partly been developed through regular planning of emergency response exercises.

“I think the services in the LRF were pretty joined up.”

“I think the key thing in our service in terms of response has been the background to the local resilience forums.”

“Being clearly integrated into the LRF worked well.”

“We already had quite an effective LRF running which has very clear business plans.”

Table 2. What factors were identified as working well across different governance structures, FRS sizes and geographical regions

		Workforce Adaptability	Motivation	Rapid Response	Partnerships	LRFs	Mutual Aid	NFCC
Governance Structure	NIFRS Board	✓	✓	✓				
	Combined	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
	County & Unitary	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Mayoral	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
	Metropolitan	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
	PFCC	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Size of Fire and Rescue Service	1-20 stations	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
	21-30 stations	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
	31-40 stations	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
	41-50 stations	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
	51+ stations	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Geographical Region	North West	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
	North East	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
	East Midlands	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
	West Midlands	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	South West	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	South East	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
	East Anglia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
	North Wales	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	South Wales	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	Northern Ireland	✓	✓	✓				
	Isle of Man	✓	✓	✓	✓			
	Isles of Scilly	✓	✓	✓	✓			

5.2 WHAT HINDERED RESPONSE EFFECTIVENESS

Table 3 highlights eight key themes identified by CFOs in relation to what hindering response effectiveness. Table 4 shows which of these themes were noted by most CFOs and which were identified in certain governance structures, sized FRSs, or geographical locations. Most commented on issues with the tripartite agreement, government communication, and concerns about staff welfare, whereas a smaller number commented on level of support provided to partner agencies, NFCC guidance, risk assessments, infrastructure, and PPE access. These findings could indicate contextual differences in challenges, or it may be that some CFOs omitted to mention all challenges encountered. Nevertheless, findings provide a useful basis for informing discussions about how best to mitigate challenges in different operational contexts. Further details about each theme are provided below with quotes to support.

Table 3. What hindered response effectiveness.

Theme name	Frequency of comments
Level of Support Provided	224
Tripartite Agreement	160
Wellbeing	128
NFCC Guidance	84
Risk Assessment	46
Government Communication	46
ICT Issues	43
PPE	40

A. TRIPARTITE AGREEMENT (TPA)

All CFOs commented on the impact the TPA had on pandemic response. Many felt the initial intentions behind the TPA had been good but that, at times, it had created barriers for supporting partner agencies. Some CFOs felt they already had a good understanding of what support was needed in their region and waiting for national agreements between the NFCC, National Employers and FBU was slowing their ability to provide support, along with restricting the range of support they could provide. Indeed, several commented on how long it took for amendments to be negotiated. Some CFOs, particularly those in medium and large FRSs, also noted that many firefighters in their region were members of the FBU and that national agreements would need to be in place first before local FBU branches would approve their members to provide support for additional activities. Accordingly, they felt they were ‘*in limbo*’, having to wait for national agreements because the FBU and National Employers would not support negotiations at a local level. This also posed implications for providing bespoke support to meet the demands of the region.

However, this was not the case for all regions, particularly CFOs operating in medium sized combined governance structures. Some of these CFOs noted having good relationships with local FBU representatives that had enabled them to have informal discussions, with the TPA serving as a useful template for informing this. Other CFOs did not wait for national

agreements to be made, instead developing local agreements with partner agencies. Comments suggest this was influenced by two factors – pre-established relationships with partner agencies in which mutual support was already a common occurrence, and having fewer firefighters as members of the FBU, which created less concern about whether the FBU would support activities without TPAs in place. Another option used by some CFOs was to have green book staff undertake support activities, but this caused some frustrations for grey book staff who wanted to provide support but were held back by their trade union.

In addition, comments were raised regarding the extent to which the TPA was applicable to all governance structures. For example, Northern Ireland has a devolved administration, with agreements for providing support being something that *“ultimately, the minister decides”*.

“As we became a bit more embroiled in a local situation, the tripartite structure almost became a little bit of a hindrance rather than a help.”

“The tripartite agreement got in the way, pulling things back from where we were.”

“What I don’t want to do in the future is have to bypass the main bulk of my workforce and use people who aren’t in the FBU to get things done when I know that there are people out there who would want to do it.”

“Tripartite agreements slowed the implementation of some changes or additional activities.”

B. GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION

Many CFOs commented on the impact that Government communication had on their response to the pandemic. Comments indicated that there were times when the Government had sent mixed messages, changed their mind about courses of action, or altered messages at short notice, which caused confusion. CFOs noted that the Government often only shared information, guidance and restrictions with FRSs and other partner agencies at the same time as this was being communicated to the public. This left services on the back foot with no time to make sense of the information or prepare. It also meant that FRS staff would seek clarification from senior managers about issues that all parties had only just been informed of at the same time.

“I think there was a real disconnect in government, and that was difficult.”

“We’ve had very poor communication from government into SCG’s and that really held us back for a long time, we were out on a limb a lot on what we’re having to do.”

“That’s generally because of government changing their mind about lots of things in very short spaces of time.”

“The daily briefings were taking place; we were finding that we were working into the evening post 5 o’clock because we were trying to play catch up with whatever come out from government on that particular day on some things.”

“The mixed messages that were coming from government and how late we would get the message.”

C. WELLBEING

In addition to praising the motivation and adaptability of their workforce, many CFOs raised concerns about the level of strain they were working under because of the pandemic. This included the strain caused by worry about the health threats the virus posed, having to identify and adapt to alternative ways of working, and juggling home schooling and other care giving responsibilities (although key workers were able to send children to school in lockdown periods, many still needed to home-school at various points). CFOs also recognised the potential for staff to experience pressure from increased workload, including needing to cover for others on leave of absence due to illness or contact with someone testing positive for Covid-19. This was particularly the case for staff undertaking specialist roles where there were only a limited number of people able to cover. Concerns were raised about the potential impact of these work strains on staff wellbeing in the longer term.

“I think fatigue has definitely been difficult.”

“After about 3 or 4 months you could see that fatigue in people.”

“It has given rise to a small number of people quite significantly suffering from a mental health and wellbeing perspective.”

“There has been an increase in mental health issues and referrals, and I think that will continue, to be honest, particularly with staff who may have partners who are furloughed or lose their job, there will undoubtedly be economic issues.”

D. LEVEL OF SUPPORT PROVIDED

Some CFOs in the North and South West of England, Northern Ireland, Isle of Man and Isles of Scilly raised questions about whether more support could have been provided to partner agencies. Although these FRSs had wanted to offer greater support, for example in driving ambulances, requests were not made. In Northern Ireland, this was attributed to peak infection rates dropping off quickly. In England, CFOs commented on both the extent to which requests were made through LRFs, and how effectively LRFs coordinated these requests and communicated information to develop an accurate local picture. In some regions, CFOs felt that LRFs were underfunded and required greater resources. In regions where strong pre-existing relationships existed between partner agencies, informal agreements were often made quickly outside of LRFs, by speaking directly to partners to offer and ask for support.

“I’m not sure we achieved as much as we could, speaking from a [region] perspective, they tended to have a lot of things in place already for say the ambulance service.”

“I’m certain there’s a lot more we could have done in terms of participating and supporting at a local level.”

“There was a lot of national coverage supporting the ambulance services, whether that be drive ambulances or doing EMR, our staff really saw that as something they would love to get involved in and there was just no demand from [ambulance service].”

“Not having information at an LRF level about what was going on in the local area in the early stages I think was quite restrictive from our perspective.”

E. NFCC GUIDANCE

The role the NFCC adopted in strategically coordinating the national response was newly introduced to respond to this unique incident of national significance. Some CFOs noted that, understandably, it had taken some time to initially develop a structure and to shape the roles needed to support this. In small and medium sized FRSs, some CFOs commented that whilst it was beneficial for the NFCC to share guidance, some services shared their own practice which had the potential to cause inconsistencies. This created confusion as to which message to follow. In addition, the level of information presented across these multiple guidance documents could be overwhelming, making it difficult to identify which aspects were most pertinent. They felt that it was not always clear why guidance was being shared and that some form of framing would have been helpful to clarify the relevance of the guidance.

"I think we had 17 pieces of different guidance from different organisations coming in and some of it contradicted the other, particularly on PPE."

"I think there was a lot of guidance from a lot of different places, some of it conflicting, which may have caused some challenges at points."

"The volume of guidance and the mixed messages was a problem. For example, the lack of clarity in guidance and scientific advice from Public Health England in comparison to the World Health Organisation."

"As the series went on there were more and more guidance documents and more and more sources that didn't always correlate with each other or overlap with each other."

F. RISK ASSESSMENT

FRSs were being requested to undertake new activities to support partner agencies, such as driving ambulances, delivering food, and undertaking welfare checks, which presented potential new risks. Given the nature of the pandemic, even core daily activities had the potential to present new risks. Accordingly, several new risk assessments needed to be developed. CFOs within small and medium sized FRSs commented on the amount of time and effort it required to oversee the development and discussion of these risk assessments, which took time away from their core roles. Comments indicated that larger services would be able to cope better with this demand due to having greater resources and infrastructure, for example allowing roles to be delegated for developing new risk assessments and having capacity to maintain core functions and provide a range of support to partners. Some CFOs did not agree with all aspects of national risk assessments, although further clarification on which aspects or why they did not agree with these were not provided.

"It took a little bit longer to work through our risk assessment to integrate it into wider multi-organization risk assessments."

"Health and safety advisors were pushing risk assessments through to the COVID gold community based on government advice and we were doing our absolute best to try and keep on top of that."

"The time taken to come up with an agreed risk assessment could be considered as not working so well."

G. ICT ISSUES

CFOs discussed the unique and unprecedented nature of the situation and how this had created challenges for trying to identify new and safe ways of working rapidly to ensure the service was still functioning. FRSs were required to introduce new technologies, update systems and to learn to get to grips with these rapidly. In one respect, this created the impetus for the service to modernise software and systems in a much shorter time frame than would have ordinarily been the case. However, trying to adapt to this new style of working also slowed down other projects and activities that they were meant to be working on. CFOs operating in NIFRS Board and PFCC governance structures also noted that choice of communication technology either had capacity issues or differed to the technology being used by other organisations, creating difficulties for communicating with health and other agencies. These CFOs commented that they would push for the use of Microsoft Teams or Zoom in future as these were the technologies being commonly used by others.

“We were focused on getting Pexip up and running, trying to run Zoom and, more importantly, trying to get Microsoft Teams working. Other things dropped in the pecking order of resolutions as a result.”

“Initially we were so busy because, what you’re effectively doing is restructuring your organisation on the run, you’re mending your car with the wheels on. The first few weeks we restructured all our ways of working to be remote and a huge amount of energy was put in to doing that and it meant that some of the development stuff fell to the side.”

“There were desktop PCs without any camera facility or microphone facility, so all of that’s been changed now.”

H. PPE

Some CFOs in small and medium sized FRSs, particularly in the South and North East of England, commented on inconsistencies in access to PPE across regions during the initial phases of the pandemic, with some LRFs having better supply chains than others. Whilst national oversight of PPE was subsequently introduced to improve coordination of access across regions, comments indicated that it would have been helpful to introduce this earlier to allow all staff to do their job in as safe a manner as possible, following appropriate PPE guidance.

“The same levels of PPE should have been done at a national level and then that bit agreed but then we had to go through the process of doing it all locally again.”

“There was a bit of an issue with PPE, there was a bit of a disjointed approach, and it became a bit frustrating in the end because we needed to get it coordinated.”

“The PPE supplies have been challenging.”

“Restrictions around availability of PPE were driving policy decisions.”

“It got to the stage where I was getting a little bit overwhelmed in terms of managing the PPE.”

Table 4. What factors were identified as barriers across different governance structures, FRS sizes and geographical regions

		Level of Support Provided	Tripartite Agreement	Wellbeing	NFCC Guidance	Risk Assessment	Government Communication	Infrastructure	PPE
Governance Structure	NIFRS Board	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
	Combined	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
	County & Unitary	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
	Mayoral		✓						
	Metropolitan		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
	PFCC		✓				✓		
Size of Fire and Rescue Service	1-20 stations		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
	21-30 stations	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	31-40 stations	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
	41-50 stations		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
	51+ stations	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	
Geographical Region	North West	✓	✓			✓			
	North East	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
	East Midlands		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	West Midlands		✓	✓			✓		
	South West	✓	✓				✓		✓
	South East		✓				✓		
	East Anglia		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
	North Wales			✓				✓	
	South Wales								
	Northern Ireland	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
	Isle of Man	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
	Isles of Scilly	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		

5.3 KEY LEARNING FOR FUTURE EVENTS OF NATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

Table 5 highlights the seven themes commonly identified by CFOs in relation to key learning, with two themes standing out more clearly. As shown in Table 6, many themes were discussed by most CFOs, but a small number were mentioned by CFOs operating in particular governance structures, sized FRSs or geographical regions. For example, most CFOs commented on maintaining flexible working, partnerships, adaptability of roles, strategies for effective communication, and the TPA. A smaller number commented on risk assessment planning and the role of the NFCC. Further details about each of these is provided below with quotes to support.

Table 5. Themes identified in relation to key learning

Theme name	Frequency of comment
Flexible Working	309
Partnerships	223
Communicating Information	48
Risk Assessment Planning	48
Adaptability of Roles	45
Tripartite Agreement	41
NFCC Role	34

A. FLEXIBLE WORKING

One key issue that most CFOs highlighted they had learned was how reliable their staff were in being able to adapt to change and new ways of working. Indeed, many CFOs commented that given the updates to technology and how effectively staff had adapted to it, allowing the option of working from home was something they intended to maintain beyond the pandemic. However, they also acknowledged that some staff struggled with working from home and found that it negatively impacted their wellbeing. Accordingly, a flexible approach would be important. They also commented on the importance of focusing on staff wellbeing more to try to identify whose physical and mental health may be at greater risk.

“Technology has helped actually because you can be in pretty regular contact.”

“Because people were working from home, the pace of work was quicker. I think it was very rapid fire, going from one Skype, Teams or Zoom meeting to another to another to another.”

“Having seen the benefit, it gives to those people in respect to their work life balance, with some caveats around longer-term mental health.”

“Some people thrived on working from home and virtual reality, others were quite affected by it, so we need to make sure we're on top of looking after our people as well.”

B. PARTNERSHIPS

CFOs frequently noted the importance of adopting a partnership approach and providing mutual support where it was possible and needed. They felt that a lot of good work had been done to reinforce relationships between partner agencies during the pandemic and that it would be important to maintain this momentum and build upon it in future.

Some CFOs noted that in the early phases of the pandemic, time had been invested in training staff and developing new risk assessments for activities that did not end up being needed by partners. Accordingly, they felt it was important to recognise that there is no *'one size fits all'* approach in the support needed within different regions. In future, they felt it would be important to adopt a balanced and tailored approach to make sure that support agreements are tailored to the needs of regions. CFOs also commented on the need to weigh the costs and benefits of providing different forms of support and whether the professional roles of FRS staff are needed or whether some activities would be best undertaken by public volunteers. They felt that this was important for minimising the potential for time and effort invested in supporting partners affecting ability to maintain core functions.

"One area of key learning for me is that we're all focused on delivering efficiency and effectiveness of our operational response."

"Reinforced that operational link between fire and ambulance and if Covid-19 does nothing else then it really should build on that operational link."

"Focusing on nothing but our response and the multi-agency response to COVID was really vital for us."

"Not to get too distracted with everything we can do for everybody else; we've got some very key roles ourselves that we need to take."

"I think we've got a lot to be involved with around recovery piece as well and our linkages, particularly county emergency service with things like public health."

C. COMMUNICATION OF INFORMATION

Most CFOs commented on the importance of effective communication and sharing relevant information in a timely manner. During the early phases of the pandemic, there had been times when too much information was shared, which became overwhelming.

CFOs suggested it would be beneficial for the NFCC to provide some framing when sharing guidance so they understood why it was being shared with them and which aspects they should be attending to.

In relation to the Government sharing information too late or sending mixed messages, some CFOs noted that this was partly the result of the dynamic and unprecedented nature of the situation and partly reacting without sufficient evidence to underpin guidance. However, they felt it would be helpful for the Government to focus on sharing information with emergency services first before being released to the public.

Several CFOs highlighted strategies they had implemented to ensure effective regular communication with their staff to share information, decisions, and the rationale behind these, along with being able to listen and respond to staff concerns so that they felt heard. These suggestions included holding regular ‘town hall’ style meetings via Microsoft Teams, blogs, setting up and regularly updating intranet pages.

“We had a good communications team in the County Council. I think if you didn't have that engagement and professional support it would have been extremely difficult.”

“Just making sure that we shared information so that I was up to date.”

“The briefings every night was good in many ways, but they were also poor in many ways. There needed to be telegraphing of information about what was coming out on their nightly briefings nationally.”

“Some areas where we need to improve include the variety of the channels we use, the nature of the way we communicate, the ability to foster two-way communication. We pumped a lot of information out and probably didn't spend enough time listening to what was coming back.”

“We probably tried to give people as much information as possible, and I think it ended up becoming a bit overkill.”

D. ADAPTABILITY OF ROLES

CFOs commented on the changing role of the FRS and that the dynamic nature of the pandemic had emphasised the potential of their service for supporting partner agencies. During the early phases of the pandemic, FRSs quickly engaged in a wide range of new activities to support partner agencies. They felt that it would be important to measure these activities and the impact this had on partner agencies to demonstrate the value of the service. CFOs also commented that whilst number of callouts to fires had declined over the years, maintaining a well-trained FRS was essential in terms of preparedness. However, responding to the pandemic had shown the level of commitment the FRS had to serving and protecting their community, and their adaptability and capacity for providing a range of support that could be stepped up when needed.

“What has become absolutely clear here as key learning is that we've been on a transformative programme in XXX for a number of years and pressed forward into areas in terms of adaptation of our role.”

“It showed me that firefighters are inherently valuable public servants who are ideologically committed to the communities they serve and, when presented with the opportunity to do so, grasp it with both hands.”

“We've got the potential to play a much more expansive role in terms of health and social welfare of communities.”

“I think that the learning is that the fire service and its staff need to widen our role if we are to move in the modern times.”

“I think we need to be flying the flag about the resilience we've provided other services through activities like delivering medication deliveries and ambulance driving. Measuring that additional work that we've delivered on behalf of others is definitely something we need to capture.”

“In times of crisis, we can be relied upon to be resilient and that's partly about protecting the service and what it's got in terms of its capacity. You could just look at straightforward demand and think that we're over-resourced but when you look at risk, it provides us with the ability to fill the space.”

E. TRIPARTITE AGREEMENT

Several CFOs commented on the need to explore what could be done differently with the TPA moving forward, with some questioning whether this model should be adopted again in future. Rather than a set of concrete formal agreements that would take time to negotiate and amend for new activities, the suggestion was made to negotiate a set of principles early on to speed up decision making at a local level. Comments highlight that this was the original intent but the local flexibility and agility it would have secured was resisted by the FBU.

“I think if you're going to do the tripartite agreement, do it in a timely manner, or at least have that prearranged list there that is immediately enacted.”

“Creating the tripartite agreement and the potential barriers it then caused was probably a key learning point of the whole thing. Would we do that again?”

“I wouldn't necessarily be against trying the tripartite agreement, but I think we'd have to use the message from this one to inform how we'd take that ball the second time around.”

“Why can't we either get those national agreements in place or get an agreement that we can use to enter into local agreements within a framework or parameter of what we can and can't do.”

F. NFCC ROLE

Comments relating to the role of the NFCC tended to come from CFOs in small to medium sized FRSSs. Comments indicated that the NFCC had shown they could serve an important and effective role in coordinating the national strategic response, including managing concerns nationally and communicating this with the Home Office. Moving forward, these CFOs felt that the NFCC should adopt a leading role in emergency planning across services due to their well-developed understanding of risk.

Whilst CFOs noted that the NFCC are well placed to distribute national guidance and advice, it would be helpful to consider how this is done to avoid overwhelming CFOs and their staff with information. Suggestions were made that it would be useful to provide some framing around each form of guidance being shared, including why it was being shared, the relevance to FRSSs, how it differed to other guidance, and which aspects were important to attend to.

CFOs also reaffirmed the benefit of establishing a set of strategic intentions early on.

"I think we've got chance here to make sure that the NFCC and Fire and Rescue services are well positioned to be the lead emergency planning organisation."

"I think the key learning is to celebrate the benefit from having the NFCC contributing consistently through the COVID-19 committee."

"There is a space for the NFCC to provide stronger leadership in the activities and direction of travel for the sector, so they talk about the strategic intent at the beginning."

"I think the strength of NFCC in supporting that nationwide response and local flexibility stuff."

"From my perspective it was just how different the NFCC was during the period of response. I think they were right on the front foot of leading the sector."

"The NFCC were absolutely on the forefront of this and everybody else was reacting around the leadership that was being given."

G. RISK ASSESSMENT PLANNING

Comments relating to risk assessment planning tended to be made by CFOs operating in small to medium sized FRSs. They noted the unique and unprecedented nature of the pandemic had left the FRS on the back foot in terms of developing risk assessments in relation to working under infectious health threats and providing prolonged support to partner agencies such as health services. However, now that they had experienced working through a public health crisis of this scale, CFOs felt they were able to make more concrete plans for future emergencies, including developing new risk assessments and agreements that could be quickly operationalised in similar future events.

Comments also highlighted the need to be *"risk aware but not risk avoidant"*. However, further clarification on what was meant by this was not provided.

"Planning preparation. Pandemics have been one of the highest on the risk register for years and whilst we all did exercises, I don't think we ever anticipated just how serious this was going to be and the potential to be even worse."

"Of course, we'll have to refresh our risk assessment, we'll constantly have to check our thought processes, our structures."

Table 6. What factors were identified as key learning across different governance structures, FRS sizes and geographical regions

		Flexible Working	Partnerships	Risk Assessment Planning	Adaptability of Roles	NFCC Role	Communicating Information	Tripartite Agreement
Governance Structure	NIFRS Board	✓		✓			✓	
	Combined	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
	County & Unitary	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Mayoral	✓	✓		✓			
	Metropolitan	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	PFCC	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Size of Fire and Rescue Service	1-20 stations	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
	21-30 stations	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	31-40 stations	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	41-50 stations	✓	✓		✓			✓
	51+ stations	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
Geographical Region	North West	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
	North East	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
	East Midlands	✓	✓	✓			✓	
	West Midlands	✓	✓				✓	✓
	South West	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
	South East	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
	East Anglia	✓				✓	✓	✓
	North Wales	✓					✓	✓
	South Wales	✓			✓			
	Northern Ireland	✓		✓			✓	
	Isle of Man	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Isles of Scilly	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

6. SUMMARY

Overall, the findings of this report provide further verification for those presented in the initial report. Full transcription of interviews and systematic analysis of these has identified similar themes as those previously discussed in the first report but, for ease of interpretation, has broken these themes down into what worked well, challenges and key learning. Given the level of agreement between the findings of the two reports, this should provide some reassurances that actions taken to address findings and recommendations presented in the initial report are still appropriate and relevant. In this respect, the findings of the current report should be viewed as a cross-validation of the initial report and its conclusions.

However, what is new about the current report is that it also highlights whether themes were commonly noted by most CFOs or whether comments tended to be raised by CFOs operating within particular governance structures, sized FRSSs, or geographical regions. This is important for informing discussions about the role that organisational and contextual features play in mitigating challenges and the mechanisms that are commonly important for promoting an effective response.

In many respects, CFOs shared numerous perspectives in relation to what worked well, challenges and key learning. CFOs were proud of the adaptability of their workforce and the level of motivation they possessed in wanting to support their communities and partner agencies. They noted that it would be beneficial to measure the level of support that fire and rescue services had provided to partner agencies and the impact of this to demonstrate the value of the service and capability to step up and take on additional activities in times of crisis. CFOs also felt they had been quick to respond to the threats posed by the pandemic and to put strategies in place to alter ways of working and minimise the risk of staff becoming infected. However, they were concerned about the levels of strain some of their staff were potentially working under due to health worries, having to adapt to new ways of working, juggling home schooling, and covering for staff due to infection. They noted that further focus would be needed on managing staff welfare longer term.

CFOs also shared a common perception of the importance of coordinating activities with partner agencies and providing support and felt that relationships with other agencies had been strengthened because of activities undertaken during the pandemic, which is something that they are keen to continue building on. They felt that whilst aspects of the TPA had been beneficial early on, the time taken to negotiate amendments had the potential to slow decision making and limit the range of support provided to partner agencies, particularly in regions where there was a large FBU membership. Some regions had found ways around this, including asking green book staff to undertake most of the support activities, but this had caused some frustrations with grey book staff who were motivated to support their communities and partner agencies in a time of national emergency. In future, rather than rigid agreements, CFOs suggested adopting a set of principles that could be quickly adapted to respond to local needs.

There was also a common perception regarding the need to focus on how information is being communicated. Most notably, the need for Government consideration on the timing of when they issue new information and guidance to prevent confusion and emergency services being placed on the back foot. Indeed, the importance of effective communication was consistently noted in relation to several different audiences, including communicating with staff in a regular, timely manner to share information and updates on guidance and how this was being implemented, and listen to and address concerns.

In addition to similarities, there were also differences across CFOs. For example, issues with the amount of time taken to develop risk assessments and concerns about sharing multiple sources of guidance that needed to be interpreted was raised by CFOs operating in small and medium sized FRSs. Comments suggested that larger FRSs had the infrastructure needed to be able to dedicate toward time and resource intense activities such as these, but that smaller FRSs did not. In relation to issuing guidance, suggestions were made to consider framing this to provide details of why the guidance was being shared, the relevance of this, what was different about it in relation to previous guidance, and the aspects that were pertinent to pay attention to. In relation to risk assessments, CFOs felt that it would be important to draw on the learning from having developed a host of new risk assessments for supporting partner agencies, and to use this to plan for future events to avoid the need to work under intense pressure to develop new risk assessments quickly in time critical situations.

In conclusion, CFOs expressed a great deal of positivity for the way their staff had responded to the early phases of the pandemic and the ‘can do’ attitude they had shown. CFOs were keen to maintain the momentum in strengthening relationships with partner agencies and felt they had demonstrated their ability to step up and provide a wide range of support when needed. This was something that they wanted to focus on beyond the pandemic, including considering how the NFCC and FRSs could take a more active role in emergency planning and coordinating LRF activities.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Within the initial report produced by Catherine Levin, Jim Owens, and Sara Waring in December 2020, a comprehensive list of recommendations was provided (also included in the Appendix for ease of reference). The findings in this second report support the recommendations presented in the initial report. However, the following additional recommendations are provided:

- i) **Frame guidance that is shared by the NFCC.** CFOs found the guidance shared by the NFCC to be useful, but documents were sometimes lengthy, and contained mixed messages from different sources. To avoid confusion and information overload, it would be useful to provide framing, including a summary of why guidance is being shared (the relevance), what is new about the guidance in comparison to others previously shared, and which aspects are important to attend to.

- ii) **Coordinating the Strategic Response.** The NFCC served an important new function in coordinating the strategic response to the pandemic, which included members undertaking new roles. It would be beneficial to draw on this experience to create a structure that can be quickly implemented when strategically coordinating responses to future events of national significance, which could be adopted within the National Coordination Advisory Framework (NCAF). This will also be beneficial for helping to identify who to contact for different requirements and for minimising duplication of efforts.
- iii) **Consider training requirements for NFCC roles.** NFCC members have gained valuable knowledge and experience from overseeing the strategic coordination of the fire and rescue service response to the pandemic. However, these same people may not be in place for future events of national significance. Accordingly, it would be useful to reflect on the knowledge and skills needed to undertake key roles and whether bespoke training is needed to support staff in undertaking such roles in future.
- iv) **Take stock of risk assessments.** During the pandemic, both grey book and green book staff undertook a range of activities to support their communities and partner agencies. This created pressure to develop several new risk assessments in a short space of time, with resource implications. To ease future pressures, it would be beneficial to take stock of risk assessments developed during the response phase of the pandemic and consider how these may be adapted for other potential events of national significance.
- v) **Consult with fire and rescue service staff to identify ways to improve communication mechanisms.** During the pandemic, staff have been required to quickly adapt to new ways of working, including working remotely and in bubbles. This has been done against a backdrop of changing guidance, information, and health concerns. Conducting a consultation with staff would be useful to identify the most effective ways of communicating information regularly to keep them informed (and how best to facilitate a working community when working remotely).
- vi) **Evaluation of the impact of the partnership approach.** During the pandemic, fire and rescue services engaged in a range of activities to support communities and partner agencies. CFOs expressed a desire to maintain this momentum beyond the pandemic. Commissioning an evaluation of the impact that these activities had on partner agencies during the pandemic (including impact evaluation to determine the intended and unintended impacts produced by these activities, and economic evaluation to determine the return on investment) would be beneficial for i) demonstrating the value of the service, ii) informing future decisions regarding how best to support partner agencies, and iii) developing bids for future funding.
- vii) **Consultation across the sector regarding Local Resilience Forums (LRFs).** CFOs highlighted regional differences in the structure of LRFs, how they are resourced and how they function, with some being better able to meet the substantial demands placed upon them during the pandemic than others. Comments also indicated the potential for fire and rescue services to take a more active role in coordinating LRFs to alleviate pressure on other services. Consultation across the emergency response sector would be beneficial for clarifying the role and structure of LRFs, expectations and resource requirements, including mapping how fire and rescue services currently support their LRF and how the sector might further support this in a more consistent way going forward.

8. APPENDIX

Table 7. Governance structure, geographical region and size of Fire and Rescue Services

FRS	Local governance structure	Number of stations	Geographic Region
Avon	Combined	21	South West
Bedfordshire	Combined	14	South East
Buckinghamshire	Combined	19	South East
Cambridgeshire	Combined	28	East Anglia
Cheshire	Combined	29	North West
Cleveland	Combined	14	North East
Cornwall	County & Unitary	31	South West
County Durham & Darlington	Combined	15	North East
Cumbria	County & Unitary	38	North West
Derbyshire	Combined	31	East Midlands
Devon & Somerset	Combined	84	South West
Dorset & Wiltshire	Combined	20	South West
East Sussex	Combined	24	South East
Essex	PFCC	50	South East
Gloucestershire	County & Unitary	21	South West
Hampshire	Combined	51	South East
Hereford & Worcester	Combined	25	West Midlands
Hertfordshire	County & Unitary	29	South East
Humberside	Combined	13	North East
Isle of Wight	County & Unitary	10	Isle of Wight
Isles of Scilly	County & Unitary	5	Isles of Scilly
Kent & Medway	Combined	55	South East
Lancashire	Combined	39	North West
Leicestershire	Combined	20	East Midlands
Lincolnshire	County & Unitary	38	East Midlands
London	Mayoral	102	South East
Manchester	Mayoral	41	North West
Merseyside	Metropolitan	23	North West
Mid and West Wales	County & Unitary	57	West Midlands
Norfolk	County & Unitary	42	East Anglia
North Wales	Combined	44	North Wales
North Yorkshire	PFCC	38	North East
Northamptonshire	PFCC	22	East Midlands
Northern Ireland	NIFRS Board	68	Northern Ireland
Northumberland	County & Unitary	16	North East
Nottinghamshire	Combined	24	East Midlands
Oxfordshire	County & Unitary	25	South East
Royal Berkshire	Combined	18	South East
Scotland	SFRS Board	356	Scotland
Shropshire	Combined	23	West Midlands
South Wales	County & Unitary	47	South Wales
South Yorkshire	Metropolitan	21	North East
Staffordshire	PFCC	33	West Midlands
Suffolk	County & Unitary	35	East Anglia
Surrey	County & Unitary	25	South East
Tyne and Wear	Metropolitan	17	North East

FRS	Local governance structure	Number of stations	Geographic Region
Warwickshire	County & Unitary	17	West Midlands
West Midlands	Metropolitan	38	West Midlands
West Sussex	County & Unitary	25	South East
West Yorkshire	Metropolitan	41	North East

*Services highlighted in red did not participate in interviews.

Recommendations section taken from the initial report produced by Catherine Levin, Jim Owens, and Sara Waring in December 2020

Based on the findings from the interviews with CFOs and stakeholders, the following recommendations are suggested to strengthen future response to the pandemic and other nationally significant events.

1. Moving forward, fire and rescue services should reaffirm (with internal and external stakeholders) their roles, responsibilities, and statutory duties as Category 1 Responders during any nationally significant event. They should work with partners in the LRF to develop a framework through which activity is commissioned and discharged. This should be underpinned by government policy and considered in the light of the recommendation in the 2019 State of Fire report about the roles of fire and rescue services and those who work in them.
2. If there is to be a national agreement which underpins activities undertaken during a pandemic or other nationally significant events, it should be kept to a set of principles or strategic objectives based on the needs of the LRF/SCG or similar. As a result, fire and rescue services will be more agile in their response and adhere to the principle of subsidiarity in which the aim is to ensure that decisions over temporary variations to roles are taken as closely as possible to those affected by them.
3. Notwithstanding the fundamental role that the firefighter plays during a nationally significant event, any changes to roles as a result of responding to periods of short term or sustained crisis should include consultation with all relevant representative bodies. This is consistent with the 2018 MoU made between LGA, AFSA, NFCC, FBU, FOA, GMB, quiltbag, FRSA, Unison, Stonewall, and Women in the Fire Service, which pledges to strive for an *“inclusive service”* with an *“inclusive culture”* and *“inclusive leadership”*⁷.
4. The NFCC should seek to formally embed the national co-ordination arrangements during the pandemic for similar nationally significant events. This formalised approach should seek to establish NFCC Committee structure/roles within a National Business Continuity Response Plan. This will formalise the relationship between the NFCC’s Central Programme Office, the NFCC Hub (for communications and data) and the National Resilience Hub, while taking full advantage of the existing National Co-ordination and Advisory Framework (NCAF) arrangements.

⁷ LGA. (2018). An inclusive fire service – recruitment and inclusion. Retrieved from <https://www.local.gov.uk/inclusive-fire-service-recruitment-and-inclusion>

5. Given the extensive work undertaken by fire and rescue services in support of ambulance trusts, underpinned by the Consensus Statement⁸, it seems prudent to pre-plan for such activity in the future. Fire and rescue services should explore how the integration of demand management planning arrangements at a local level can be utilised to best effect. There should be a particular focus on how to meet protracted periods of high demand resulting from a nationally significant event or an unexpected surge in demand.
6. There is a need for high quality, consistent and timely data to support decision making during times of crisis. Fire and rescue services should be asked to provide data once to a central repository that is then accessible to all. Data collection, data storage, analysis, governance and transparency should be built into business continuity planning at the pre-planning stage. Fire and rescue services should seek pragmatic solutions to enable effective data sharing with partners.
7. Business continuity planning arrangements should be explored in order to ensure that fire and rescue services strike the balance between efficiency, effectiveness and people. Planning assumptions should include considerations for the resilience of business-critical workgroups. Organisational transformation and productivity needs to be considered if fire and rescue services are to be effective over a protracted period.
8. Building on the experience of working virtually during the pandemic, fire and rescue services should consider what methods have worked well and can be subsumed into and enhance business as usual practice. This includes the virtual training experience for operational staff.
9. Fire and rescue services have learnt to use virtual approaches to offer safety advice to homes and businesses alike. These need to be integrated into local risk management planning. To aid this, good practice should be gathered as part of the work of the NFCC's Prevention and Protection Programme and collated into national guidance supported by a Fire Standard.
10. Using anonymised data drawn from staff surveys carried out by fire and rescue services, the NFCC should, as part of its People Programme, understand the impact of working from home on staff's health and well-being. This data should inform the development of national guidance in this area. As part of this, fire and rescue services should share how they have ensured compliance with health and safety legislation.
11. Discussions at a local level about rationalising fire and rescue service estate and making efficiencies as a result of changes to staff working arrangements should inform the future work of the NFCC's Finance Committee and future bids for funding.
12. The pandemic offers an opportunity for fire and rescue services to take a fresh look at the recruitment of on-call staff. There is an extensive group of people now working from home who may never have previously considered becoming an on-call firefighter, they represent an untapped resource to bolster this part of the workforce. The NFCC should start a conversation with employers to show how working from home can be integrated with availability for on-call firefighting and provide mutual benefits for staff development.

⁸ Consensus Statement on joint working during the COVID-19 pandemic between NFCC and AACE. <http://www.nationalfirechiefs.org.uk/COVID-19>