

# **Fire and rescue service response to COVID-19**

## **Report for the NFCC COVID-19 Committee**

By

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## 1. Foreword

I am grateful to the NFCC Chair, Roy Wilsher, for the opportunity to lead the NFCC's COVID-19 Committee and to co-ordinate the fire and rescue response at a national level. With the unwavering support of the NFCC and my Committee colleagues, we were able to respond to the rapidly changing events that unfolded from the beginning of this year, as we all endured the national lockdown from the end of March.

While fire and rescue services were not the lead organisation in responding to the pandemic, they were key partners and contributed greatly to the needs of local communities. Fire and rescue staff stepped up and took on new roles, adapting to new ways of working.

The Committee commissioned this research in order to gain a timely insight into what fire and rescue services did to respond to the pandemic during the period March – September 2020 and to use this to inform future approaches. The researchers spoke to almost all of the Chief Fire Officers (or equivalents) and uncovered a rich seam of information that demonstrated the huge impact that COVID-19 had on all areas of service delivery. This is enhanced by the inclusion of testimony from stakeholders drawn from government, representative bodies and the ambulance service.

I am pleased to see a significant section on key learning. It is important that the Committee and the NFCC leadership considers this learning now in order to improve our approaches going forward. The pandemic is not over; this report provides useful observations drawn from across fire and rescue services and I would encourage all those in leadership positions to review it and consider how it might be useful at a local level.

Part of the reason why fire and rescue services were able to step up was due to the discussions between the NFCC, the Fire Brigades Union and the National Employers. The Tripartite Agreements that emerged from these discussions demonstrated how firefighters could adapt and respond to a national crisis, reacting to the needs of their local communities. And while the report unsurprisingly questions the speed of this work the fire and rescue service's ability to work in partnership at both a local and national level has been shown once more to be one of its greatest strengths.

There are 12 recommendations in this report. They provide some significant insight for the NFCC as a member organisation but also to all of us as fire and rescue service leaders. I will be working with the Committee to look at these recommendations in detail to consider our response and any changes that need to take place as a result.

I hope that this report, taken together with upcoming findings from HMICFRS's COVID-19 inspection, will give all of us the chance to reflect on the fire and rescue service's considerable achievements to date and inform the way we respond in the future.

CFO Phil Garrigan

Chair

COVID-19 Committee

## 2. Executive Summary

This report was commissioned by the NFCC's COVID-19 Committee to find out how fire and rescue services responded to the pandemic between March and September 2020. The report authors, Catherine Levin, Jim Owen and Dr Sara Waring, interviewed Chief Fire Officers (CFO) or their equivalents as well as key stakeholders drawn from government, representative bodies and the ambulance service. The telephone and video call interviews were based on a consistent question set and lasted on average 40 minutes. The recordings are securely stored at the University of Liverpool with a view to being used for further in-depth research at a later date.

The authors analysed the interviews with the CFOs and identified 10 themes, which form the structure of the report. The findings from the stakeholder interviews are provided in a separate section. Taken together, the report then sets out key learning that emerged from the interviews and identifies whether it is from the CFOs or the stakeholders, or in some cases both. The report finishes with a set of 12 recommendations for the Committee to consider. A list of interviewees is provided in the appendices.

The report starts by looking at the context of fire and rescue services as they worked with local partners to respond to the pandemic. The Local Resilience Forum (LRF) is at the heart of this effort and CFOs largely reported very positive experiences of working with local partners as emergency arrangements were put into place. The creation of the Strategic Co-ordinating Group and its supporting structures allowed the fire and rescue service to find its place and contribute to the response. The relationships built up over many years through planning and training exercises provided a solid foundation upon which to work together during a time of national crisis.

Most CFOs had mixed feelings about the introduction of the national Tripartite Agreement between the NFCC, the Fire Brigades Union and the National Employers. A small number of CFOs offered only positive comment about the Tripartite Agreement and its processes. These CFOs represented a range of fire and rescue service structural types; some with more challenging local trade union relations. In others the burden of partner organisation requests for support were low or non-existent, because other suitable resources were available to support communities. In these circumstances the Agreement was less exercised. Some questioned why a negotiation was needed during a national crisis, others acknowledged that it may not have been possible to negotiate some of the requested activities locally.

Some CFOs felt that the current national negotiations on broadening the role of firefighters had made the negotiation of temporary changes to terms and conditions more problematic. These and other difficulties meant some CFOs were concerned about answering requests for support from LRFs because they were unsure whether they would get local trade union agreement. This led some to prefer to deploy only Green book staff in support of other agencies.

Opinions on the Tripartite Agreement appeared to vary by degree in accordance with local governance structures, the size of each fire and rescue service, the strength and quality of local industrial relationships, the mix of trade union representation, the level of experience of CFOs and the level of support being requested by partners.

CFOs said it was important for them to be visible to staff despite the geographic dispersal of their teams into fire station 'bubbles' and to new working from home arrangements. That visibility was achieved through new use of virtual communication, with many fire and rescue services investing in or expanding the use of existing technologies. Microsoft Teams, Zoom, WhatsApp, Workplace and other channels provided the means by which staff could keep in touch and work remotely in an effective way. COVID-19 accelerated digital transformation for many fire and rescue services.

Working from home has been largely successful, with CFOs commending the way that staff have adapted to the new way of working. They expressed concern for the health and safety of their staff, in particular the creation of home offices and provided many examples of how they have responded to issues affecting the wellbeing of staff who are separated from their normal working environment.

Many changes were put in place to increase the safety of frontline staff. Commonly, fire and rescue services locked down fire stations and control rooms very early on, well before the national lock down. They formed bubbles for individual watches and for fire stations with new safety regimes in place to reduce the risk of infection. Control rooms were isolated to protect this work group. To assist with training and maintenance of operational competence, fire and rescue services experimented with virtual approaches and used these both with their wholetime and on-call staff. Availability levels for both wholetime and on-call staff remained high throughout.

Virtual ways of working are a recurring motif of the interviews and none more so than in prevention and protection. No longer able to visit homes and businesses, fire and rescue services have been creative in developing new ways of advising about fire risk. For example, the virtual Home Fire Safety Visit includes a remote triage to assess risk and where it has been high, some fire and rescue services have still visited homes but with new COVID-safe procedures in place.

Data was mentioned by many interviewees. In some cases, it was in the context of too much data, for others there was a paucity. The failure to join up in terms of how to share data between organisations or a demand for data where the end was not clear and frustrated interviewees in equal measure.

During the interviews, CFOs often talked about the NFCC. There was, on the whole, a very positive response to how the NFCC had helped fire and rescue services. Examples included the creation and leadership of the COVID-19 Committee; the usefulness of the Strategic Intentions to provide a foundation for local approaches; the co-ordination of the procurement of PPE via Kent Fire and Rescue Service and the peer support provided by the NFCC co-ordinated weekly Chiefs' call.

Seven themes emerged from the interviews with stakeholders. Overall, stakeholders commended fire and rescue services for their 'can-do' attitude in seeking to support partner agencies, with driving ambulances noted as being particularly beneficial. Feedback indicated that the increased availability of on-call firefighters had helped to strengthen capacity for providing support. As with CFOs, stakeholders also highlighted the importance of effective communication and strong relationships for improving response effectiveness and for supporting staff wellbeing.

During interviews, stakeholders also talked about regional differences in the ability to source appropriate PPE, which resulted in regional differences in when staff were able to wear PPE. While some of these difficulties reflected problems with access to PPE across public services, moving forward, it was suggested that ensuring accurate data is captured across regions in relation to PPE stock and usage would help to improve central support with maintaining appropriate PPE levels.

As with CFOs, most stakeholders also had mixed feelings about the Tripartite Agreement, viewing the first few versions as beneficial for enabling support, but subsequent additions were slow to be negotiated, which often meant partners needed to find alternative solutions.

Stakeholders also noted regional differences in the range of support provided and how quickly decisions were made. Regions where relationships were well established between partners tended to make decisions quickly at a local level with the Tripartite Agreement serving as a guide. In other regions, decision making was slowed by many decisions being passed up to the Tripartite Group to be negotiated due to concerns about not getting local trade union agreement.

The feedback also highlighted that a lack of consultation across all unions resulted in large numbers of firefighters and Green book staff being affected by an agreement they had no representation in developing. Some stakeholders suggested that now a fairly comprehensive set of agreements, risk assessments and training exist, support may be quicker to implement in future.

The key learning section provides a rich source of experience for fire and rescue services to consider as they continue to respond to the pandemic, albeit during a different phase now. Some of it is very specific to response, but some will be useful for the transition to what is commonly called the new normal.

The report concludes with a set of 12 recommendations that loosely follow the structure of the report. The authors suggest that the role of the fire and rescue service within the LRF structures is reaffirmed to allow it to thrive and contribute to full effect. For any future nationally significant events, any national agreements should be kept to a set of principles or strategic objectives based on the needs of LRFs. Agreements should include consultation with all relevant representative bodies. There is also a recommendation about how the NFCC should operate when there is a nationally significant event that affects all fire and rescue services as well as one that builds on the learning from the Consensus Statement developed between the NFCC and AACE.

The recommendations also cover business continuity arrangements and in particular at how to maintain the resilience of staff for extended periods of time. The long-term impact of those changes offers the opportunity to review and rationalise fire and rescue service premises and estate with a view to making savings. Learning from virtual approaches in many areas of fire and rescue service business is also the focus of some of the recommendations, along with a look at how data can be better used to inform decision making. The pandemic also offers an opportunity for fire and rescue services to take a fresh look at the recruitment of on-call staff.

The findings in this report capture an important point in fire and rescue service history. The timing of these interviews means that the recollections were fresh and the learning still raw for many. By sharing the findings through this report for the COVID-19 Committee, the authors hope that they can be a useful contribution to the evolution of fire and rescue service response and eventual recovery from the pandemic.

### 3. Background

The NFCC established a COVID-19 Committee to co-ordinate all NFCC activity related to the COVID-19 response and the transition to a new normality, providing reassurance to the Home Office and to other stakeholders.

The Committee standing membership is shown below:

Phil Garrigan	Chair
Andy Bell	Vice Chair and Recovery Lead
Sarah Gawley	Home Office
Stuart Errington	Local Resilience Forum Lead
Ian Hayton	Emergency Services Liaison
Peter Heath	NFCC Operations Committee
Rick Hylton	NFCC Prevention Committee
Ian Leigh	NFCC Protection Committee
Ann Millington	NFCC Workforce Committee
Amy Webb	NFCC Finance Committee
Nick Collins	NFCC Central Programme Office
Chris Davis	NFCC Health & Safety
Russ Paramore	NFCC Business Continuity Group
Neil Griffiths	NFCC Hub (Data)
Chris Colgan	Chair of PPE Group
Steven Adams	NFCC Strategic Support
Ged Sheridan	Executive Support
Sandra Wainwright	Executive Support
NFCC Leadership	Roy Wilsher, Phil Loach, Huw Jakeway

In July 2020, the NFCC COVID-19 Committee commissioned research to gain some understanding of how fire and rescue services had responded to the pandemic and how they were learning from that experience to plan for a potential second wave.



## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Chief Fire Officer interviews

The Committee asked for each Chief Fire Officer (CFO)<sup>1</sup> to be interviewed on a one-to-one basis using a short set of questions.

The question set is provided below:

1. To what extent have the NFCC's Strategic Intentions helped your service to deliver its response to the crisis at a local level?
2. What worked well?
3. What got in the way or limited your effectiveness?
4. What would you do differently in the event of a second wave, either locally or nationally?
5. What is the key learning you would like to leave us with?
6. What outcomes do you think should be measured to understand how well fire services are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic? Why?

Initially question 1 was: "How do you feel the fire and rescue service responded to the pandemic?" After the first eight interviews, the question was changed as it was too broad.

Due to time and COVID-19 related constraints, all of the interviews were carried out by telephone and recorded using an app called Tape a Call Pro. Each call lasted between 30 and 50 minutes. The recordings were uploaded to secure servers at Liverpool University and deleted from the interviewer's phone.

The interviews were carried out by Catherine Levin, Communications Adviser and freelance consultant to the NFCC; and Jim Owen, previously Deputy Chief Fire Officer of Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service (until 2015) and now an independent consultant.

The Chair of the Committee wrote to all Chief Fire Officers on 20 July 2020 to make them aware of the work and provide advance notice of the questions. The NFCC's Central Programme Office managed the interview schedule.

The interviews took place between 27 July and 7 September 2020. Of the 50 fire and rescue services across the UK, 47 Chief Fire Officers participated. The full list is provided at Appendix A.

### 4.2 Stakeholder interviews

In addition to the Chief Fire Officer interviews, the Committee asked for stakeholders to be interviewed. Dr Sara Waring, Research Impact Lead at the Critical and Major Incident Psychology Research Group at the University of Liverpool carried out this work.

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<sup>1</sup> A note on terminology: the report uses the term Chief Fire Officer or CFO throughout for simplicity. Two of the interviewees hold the rank of Deputy Chief or Assistant Chief and two interviewees are Chief Executives of their respective services.

In August 2020, the Chair of the COVID-19 Committee wrote to key representatives from across stakeholder groups to inform them of the commissioned evaluation. This was followed by an email from Dr Waring them to participate in an interview to share their views and experiences, with a view to informing learning and planning for a potential second wave.

In order to capture a range of perspectives on the fire and rescue service response to the pandemic, invitations were extended to representatives from:

- Association of Ambulance Chief Executives (AACE)
- Unions: Fire Brigade Union (FBU), Fire Officers Association (FOA), Fire and Rescue Services Association (FRSA), Fire Leaders Association (FLA)<sup>2</sup> and Unison
- Local Government Association (LGA – National Employers)
- Home Office
- NFCC

The interviews took place between the 19 August and 2 September 2020. In total, 10 representatives consented to participate. The full list is provided at Appendix B.

The Committee asked for stakeholders to be interviewed using a short set of questions. There were some differences in questions posed to different stakeholder groups. For example, unions were asked about staff welfare, while other stakeholders were asked about the support received from fire and rescue services. Question sets are provided below:

#### Unions

1. How well do you think the fire and rescue service maintained the delivery of its core functions during the pandemic?
2. How well did fire and rescue services look after their people during the pandemic?
3. To what extent do you think fire and rescue services provide enough support to partner agencies?
4. To what extent were trade unions involved in the planning and delivery of the fire and rescue service response to COVID-19?
5. Is there anything you would have done differently in response to the pandemic?
6. What could the fire and rescue service do differently in the event of a second wave of the pandemic, either locally or nationally?
7. What is the key learning you would like to leave us with?

#### Other stakeholders

1. How well do you think the fire and rescue service maintained the delivery of its core functions during the pandemic?
2. How well aligned was the pre-planning of the fire and rescue service and partner agencies?

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<sup>2</sup> Represented by Chief Fire Officer Mick Crennell from Avon Fire and Rescue Service during his interview on 30 July 2020.

3. How well do you think the fire and rescue service responded to the needs of partner agencies during the COVID-19 pandemic?
4. Did your agency experience any obstacles to gaining support from the fire and rescue service?
5. What could the fire and rescue service do differently in the event of a second wave of the pandemic, either locally or nationally?
6. Is there anything you would have done differently in response to the pandemic?
7. What is the key learning you would like to leave us with?

Due to time and COVID-19 related constraints, all interviews were carried out using Zoom and Microsoft Teams video calling software. They were recorded using a Dictaphone. Interview length ranged from 36 to 48 minutes. The recordings were uploaded to secure University of Liverpool servers and deleted from all other platforms.

Dr Waring conducted all stakeholder interviews. In order to engender open and honest feedback, representatives were assured anonymity.

Although interviews were recorded, the need for rapid feedback to inform future response prevented them from being transcribed and analysed in-depth. However, detailed notes were taken from recordings and systematically compared to identify prominent themes.

## 5. Introduction

Commissioned by the NFCC's COVID-19 Committee, this report provides an insight into how fire and rescue services responded to the COVID-19 pandemic during the period March – July 2020. Drawing on interviews with Chief Fire Officers and fire and rescue service stakeholders, the report examines the wide range of activity carried out by services and how this was affected by the pandemic.

The timeliness of the interviews, carried out between late July and early September 2020, meant that the memory of responding to the pandemic was still fresh as fire and rescue services transitioned to the recovery phase. The potential for a second wave of infection has influenced a cautious approach to the transition to a new normality.

During the interviews, CFOs and stakeholders alike were very open and candid in exchange for a reassurance of anonymity in this report. To assist the narrative, the report uses anonymous quotes to illustrate points, provide evidence and bring to life the experience expressed by the interviewees.

Using just six questions with which to structure the interviews, CFOs were able to explore a wide range of topics. There was a focus on the operational side of fire and rescue, but through discussion it was possible to uncover how all staff groups were affected by the sudden lockdown forced on the UK in March 2020.

With an average interview time of around 40 minutes, it wasn't possible to cover every aspect of fire and rescue business, but some strong themes emerged, and these have helped to form the structure of this report.

The Tripartite Agreement between the NFCC, the FBU and the National Employers which saw firefighters take on new roles during the pandemic is a dominant theme in the interviews and as such takes up a substantial section of this report.

The stakeholder interviews took a slightly different form and are reported in their own section. The themes are similar, but the nuances different as the stakeholders provide perspectives outside of the day to day running of the fire and rescue service.

As well as providing a timely insight into how fire and rescue services responded to a national pandemic, this report captures key learning identified by CFOs that can be used by the NFCC and others to help improve the response to a second wave of infection. While local rather than national lockdowns may be anticipated, many of the principles set out in the key learning equally apply.

This report contains recommendations for the COVID-19 Committee to consider. They cover a range of topics and vary in terms of granularity; they are offered as the views of the authors based on the findings from all of the interviews carried out for this report.

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue (HMICFRS) is carrying out a COVID-19 inspection in the second half of 2020 and will no doubt dig deeper into many of the matters covered in this report, contributing more insight along the way.

## 6. Planning and the Local Resilience Forum

Fire and rescue services are designated as a Category 1 Responder under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. They are statutory members of the Local Resilience Forum and have long-standing relationships with local partners as they have planned, exercised and responded to local emergencies over the years. Where there is an emergency, a Strategic Co-ordinating Group (SCG) is established to provide leadership and oversight of the response.

Many CFOs chair the LRF in their area, but few chaired the COVID-19 SCG. Some reported that the chair of the SCG lacked command and control experience and needed a lot of support from fire and rescue service and police partners in particular. There was a general agreement that health was in the lead and that the fire and rescue service was a junior partner.

Not all CFOs had the same approach to working with the SCG. In some areas they reflected the structures within their own service by allocating a principal officer to deal with the strategic response, and more junior officers overseeing the tactical response as well as the very specific work of cells which focused on work like logistics, PPE etc. Where this happened, the CFO would have one principal officer dealing with external issues and one focused on managing the service itself.

In one service, the SCG met at their headquarters, so they felt very attuned to what was going on. The CFO reported that there were benefits of having this convening role where neutrality of the fire and rescue service is respected and as a result this CFO said they were a “trusted partner”.

Often the fire and rescue service provided the lead for the Tactical Co-ordinating Group and found that this was a good place to be in terms of understanding the wider requirements of their local area and working closely with partners on the ground. Some fire and rescue services were able to second staff into the LRF and benefitted from being at the heart of local arrangements.

The relationships that fire and rescue services have developed during business-as-usual periods have proven to be a great benefit to them when dealing with times of crisis. The experience of working side by side with the LRF and partners in the wider health sector during the pandemic is seen as something that will further strengthen their working relationships in the future.

*“The flu pandemic plan was there, and it’s been high on the register for years and we did exercises, but I think we all didn’t anticipate just how serious it was going to be and the potential for this to be even worse.”*

Discussing planning, many CFOs thought that the pandemic flu plans were a useful place to start but they did not work for the COVID-19 scenario and quickly put new arrangements in place.

*“We realised that the pandemic flu Business Continuity Plan was not appropriate, so we developed a specific COVID-19 plan which has been revised and renewed throughout. We have just added action cards for areas in the event of local lockdowns explaining that means to a department or*

*stations. We have had small outbreaks which have allowed us to test our thinking around action plans.”*

Putting it more bluntly, one CFO said, “The pandemic plan was hopeless”. It did not feature any assumptions about the lockdown scenario and the planning assumptions about sickness absence level were not reflected in reality. Most pandemic flu plans contained an assumption that there would be a 20 per cent loss of staff but found sickness levels were much lower and even at their peak were only at around 6-8 per cent.

A few CFOs talked about the role of the Government Liaison Officer (GLO) in the LRF. They expressed disappointment at the quality of the interaction, citing changes in the person doing the job and the lack of handover as limiting factors. The concern was so great that some fire and rescue services wrote to the Government to complain. There was some discussion about whether officials in government departments really understood how the GLO role worked in times of crisis.

Planning for recovery as well as response led to many CFOs saying that emerging from lockdown was much harder than going into it. However, the move to local lockdowns has blurred the distinction between plans that cover an entire fire and rescue service area and ones that are hyper local. Local outbreak plans have been developed in some areas and one CFO said that there is only one true measure of success: did the pre-planning work?

Looking ahead to a second wave of COVID-19 infections, CFOs reported feeling more confident about planning. One talked about a, “New playbook of options to deal with the spread” and how they felt “More tuned in to how the virus operates”.

As planning for a second wave continues, CFOs talked about the impact the response had on their specialist planning staff – the emergency planners, the business continuity managers - and how to look after their well-being in the long term. The reliance on a small group of staff for critical planning work, both for the fire and rescue service but also to assist the wider work of the LRF is something that CFOs are aware of and are looking at how to improve resilience.

Organisational fatigue comes up as a topic of concern in several areas of fire and rescue service delivery, particularly where there are small numbers of specialist staff such as control room operators. Improving planning to take account of the needs of these staff is something that fire and rescue services are now considering.

The long-term position of the fire and rescue service within the LRF structure and its role in terms of resilience planning emerged during one interview.

*“I think the fire and rescue service has the opportunity to be the organisation across the whole country that leads on resilience. The police are good at this as well, but the others don’t get emergencies like we do. So, the NFCC should be pushing hard to be part of the national review of resilience that I know is going on (which only partly covers emergency planning in its purest form), and we should position ourselves as the emergency planning service in effect.”*

## 7. Leadership

Many CFOs talked about how their service responded quickly to the crisis, using language associated with managing a major incident and the use of command and control. They recognised that during a public health emergency, core duties would still need to be maintained.

The ability to change existing leadership arrangements was raised by many CFOs, who described how they created inward focused leadership to manage the day to day and outward leadership to deal with the local and national relationships. Some fire and rescue services found it harder to do this as they have smaller leadership teams.

Creating resilience within leadership structures was raised a few times, particularly where services had recently been involved in major incidents related to flooding. One CFO reported the pressure the leadership team felt to provide a 24/7 response for such an extended period of time and thought that their resilience levels may not be right. At the same time, the CFO thought that the visibility of the leadership had diminished because of staff working from home and fire stations being locked into protective bubbles. The response prompted a move to video messaging, which is discussed in the Communications section of this report.

Few CFOs talked about the role of elected members during the crisis. Some FRAs held virtual fire authority meetings once government guidance changed in April. There was some discussion about delegated authority and some about the disconnect between members and officers. This is possibly an area for further work because it did not emerge from the majority of interviews.

The existing relationships between CFOs in regions of the country were helpful. Some regions met regularly by Zoom or other media to discuss common issues and problems. They created a peer network in the region and for some used this prior to taking part in national calls led by the NFCC.

For example, in the South East, the three services that make up the Thames Valley went further and worked together to share tasks and reduce burdens on each individual service. Two CFOs reported including their local Ambulance Trust Chief Executive in their regional CFO meetings. In another area, where the LRF covered two bordering fire and rescue services, the respective CFOs shared the Gold leadership role, reducing the burden on both services.

## 8. The Tripartite Agreement

In response to the developing COVID-19 crisis, the Tripartite Group was formed out of initial discussions between the FBU and the NFCC, which were broadened to include the National Employers. The Tripartite Agreement that followed was signed on 26 March 2020.

The agreement set out the intention to maintain a resilient and effective operational response during the COVID-19 pandemic, while supporting the broader public sector response (with 'additional activities') and maintaining the highest standards possible with regard to the health, safety and welfare of all staff in the fire and rescue service.

Additional activities, though not specifically defined in the agreement, were additional areas of work that might generally be thought to be outside of the ordinary terms and conditions of fire and rescue service employees. The agreement looked for a balance to be struck between what was being requested of a fire and rescue service, what was reasonable to ask of firefighters, the value of the activity (external) and what can be provided based on an assessment of the impact that the provision might have on the fire and rescue service (internal).

Minimum safety requirements were to be met before any activity could be undertaken, which meant that the activity would be risk assessed and any additional necessary training provided, along with PPE and adequate management oversight. With these requirements met, staff might volunteer to undertake these activities knowing that the NJC for Local Authority Fire and Rescue Services would consider such work part of the core job, on a temporary basis.

### 8.1 The activities

The agreement carried three already agreed additional activities, which by 21 May had grown to fourteen in all, each announced through Tripartite Statements made by the Group. The list of activities is provided below:

1. Ambulance Service assistance: Ambulance Driving and Patient/Ambulance personnel support limited to current competence (Not additional fire and rescue service First or Co-Responding).
2. Vulnerable persons – delivery of essential items.
3. COVID-19 – Mass casualty (Movement of bodies).
4. Face Fitting for masks to be used by frontline NHS and clinical care staff working with COVID-19 patients.
5. Delivery of PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities.
6. Assisting in taking samples for COVID-19 antigen testing.
7. Driving ambulance transport not on blue-lights (excluding known COVID-19 patients) to outpatient appointments or to receive urgent care.
8. Driving Instruction by fire and rescue service driver trainers to deliver training for non-Service personnel to drive ambulances (not on blue-lights).
9. The assembly of single use face shields for the NHS and care work front line staff.



10. Packing/Repacking food supplies for Vulnerable people.
11. Known or suspected COVID-19 Patients: transfer to and from Nightingale hospitals under emergency response (blue light) or through non-emergency patient transfer (not on blue lights).
12. Non-COVID-19 Patients: Transfer to and from Nightingale hospitals under emergency response (blue light) or through non-emergency patient transfer (not on blue lights) – this includes recovering and recuperating patients no longer infected with COVID-19.
13. Delivery of pre-designed training packages on Infection Prevention and Control, including hand, hygiene, PPE 'donning' & 'doffing' guidance and procedures; and supporting the care home staff testing i.e., to train care home staff to train others according to the principle of 'train the trainers.'
14. Delivery of pre-designed training packages on Infection Prevention and Control, including hand, hygiene, PPE 'donning' & 'doffing' guidance and procedures; and supporting the care home staff testing i.e., direct to care home staff.

On 3 June, Tripartite Statement 9 identified some tensions regarding a small number of cases where not all parties to the agreement felt that the Tripartite process had been followed when introducing additional activities or raised questions as to whether the work was commensurate with the role of the fire and rescue service or its employees. The statement stressed that no new activity could be introduced until an affirmative response had been given by the NJC Joint Secretaries.

The Statement also addressed two other points: the first described variations that were occurring between format content and findings amongst risk assessments and noted that the Tripartite-developed national risk assessments being provided for each activity were best practice. Any necessary local variations to the assessments were to be agreed through the local health and safety structures. Secondly, any necessary temporary changes to work patterns or secondments for the volunteers undertaking the activities had to be processed through normal local industrial relations mechanisms and not imposed, while also protecting the existing rights of employees.

## 8.2 Was the Tripartite Agreement a success?

A small number of CFOs offered only positive comment about the Tripartite Agreement and its processes. These CFOs represented a range of fire and rescue service structural types; some with more challenging local trade union relations. In others the burden of partner organisation requests for support were low or non-existent, because other suitable resources were available to support communities. In these circumstances the Agreement was less exercised.

One CFO commented that the Tripartite Agreement, *“enabled some activities that couldn't be negotiated temporarily locally.”* The opportunities to support ambulance services were particularly welcomed. Another CFO commented in regard to working with local resilience forums that, *“We were there and happy to put forward the Tripartite Agreement to show where we could step in and help.”*

*“Application of the risk assessments provided, and contextualised by services, allowed them to continue and find a new way of working really quickly and the success of what was provided is shown in low number absences throughout the fire and rescue services.”*

Most CFOs were effusive about the willingness of staff to volunteer to do other work, whether paid or unpaid. Where other work was already being done in the service before the pandemic, some CFOs reported seeing FBU members step back from some of that work.

Invariably, whether CFOs offered criticism of the Tripartite Agreement and its processes or not, there was gratitude for the work that officers of the NFCC did during the crisis, for the support they provided and acknowledgement of the positive intentions underlying the development of the agreement.

*“The Tripartite Agreement was very helpful nationally and saved a lot of effort, with one conversation being had nationally to thrash out the principles of wider working [outside of the firefighter role]. [however,] There were some complications to it locally.”*

### 8.3 Negotiation process and the status of the Agreement

Many CFOs were critical of the negotiation process for a variety of reasons. Some felt that the process provided the FBU with an effective veto, because the three parties were afforded the same standing in the negotiations. Some felt that the insistence on national and then local negotiation made the process cumbersome, too slow and gave too many opportunities for disagreement.

Local difficulties, where the parties couldn't agree, were sometimes referred to the Tripartite Group in accordance with the Agreement, and national agreements were sometimes also contested locally.

Others commented on the lack of involvement of other trade unions such as the Fire and Rescue Service Association and the Fire Officers Association, who they said felt marginalised. Some found it frustrating that it was considered necessary for a Tripartite Agreement during a crisis and that it made the fire and rescue service seem inflexible.

*“The fire and rescue service tried to demonstrate we have a ‘can do’ attitude and that we were agile in our role. When the national need arises, we will do what it takes, and we just need to sort out the politics getting in the way of that.”*

There had been some confusion over the status of the Agreement and its processes. According to CFOs involved in the negotiations, the Agreement had been intended to be “an enabler” at a national level and not an “instruction”. However, some CFOs didn't feel this was clear, at least at first, with one CFO stating that “we should ... have been much clearer in saying this is only guidance at a national level which means you don't have to agree with it.”

The presence of the process also provided for some disagreement, with parties locally disagreeing with national parties as to whether an activity ought to be negotiated locally or nationally.

*“The Tripartite Agreement, while it did result in [14 agreed] activities ..., while I understand what it did and I’ve heard it being labelled as an enabler, the reality was we had to duplicate everything at a local level because the local FBU, in fact the regional FBU would only accept temporary local agreements, regardless of the fact that these had been agreed at a national level. So, while it gave us a foundation, it did not replace all the work we had to do to get a temporary local agreement in place.”*

One CFO felt the Agreement was, *“limited in effectiveness because it still relied on volunteers which gave everyone the option of saying no.”*

Interestingly CFOs generally reported that they had an abundance of volunteers to undertake those activities requested by partners, but did not use them fully, as there was a strong perception amongst CFOs that local FBU branches were prevented from making local agreements without the agreement of the FBU’s national officers, whereas it was believed that the original agreement supported such moves. Equally some CFOs were concerned that some fire and rescue services used the agreement process to deal with matters that should have been agreed locally.

At the same time some CFO’s indicated that support was not requested and as such they did not deploy resources to meet an already addressed need.

This two (or three) level approach was seen as a brake on the agility of fire and rescue services to respond to requests for support from other agencies who were struggling to provide suitable services during the crisis, (although some services were able to move more quickly on matters that were not covered by the Tripartite Agreement).

Once the Agreement came into place, some felt it limited opportunities to respond to local needs and made managers less likely to try new activities.

*“In the early stages of the pandemic, local partners looked to the fire and rescue service to provide assistance and the fire and rescue service was able to be agile in its response. Once the Agreement was in place, it reduced flexibility to respond and slowed things down so that partners sought help from elsewhere.”*

Some felt that the Agreement was aimed at larger metropolitan services and was not necessary for all services.

*“The Tripartite Agreement is both good and bad. Some fire and rescue services would never have undertaken the breadth of tri activities without the agreement, but others were suppressed by it. Having to repeatedly ask whether it is okay to act in the height of a pandemic, then having to wait a ridiculous amount of time for a response, when you have already agreed the safeguards for staff limits a CFO’s ability to step up strategically – so in that context its disabling. We need to be quicker to be effective.”*

## 8.4 Risk assessments

On the 10 June, the Tripartite Group published national risk assessments covering most of the additional activities agreed through the Tripartite Agreement. This development was greeted with a mixed response. Some saw the role of the Tripartite Group as unsuited to determining the suitability of risk assessments, which were not seen as matters for negotiation.

These national risk assessments were still subject to local variation through the local health and safety structures and, where agreement couldn't be reached, CFOs found some risk assessments being sent to regional FBU officials or even national. A number of CFOs thought the turnaround of risk assessments through this process was slow and therefore unhelpful.

*"A lot of the work we did with the FBU did put us in a really strong position due to their involvement with risk assessments and staff involvement but in the early days the response needed from firefighters was restrained by the Tripartite Agreement."*

*"The issue of the national risk assessments was important and useful, and they need to sit parallel to the local assessments but should every single service, doing something similar, have to submit our own risk assessments to the centre?"*

Other CFOs were grateful for the national risk assessments, which saved on local resources being committed to the same process. Some were relying on the presence of the national risk assessments to call on only if they were requested by a Local Resilience Forum to deliver one of the additional activities and, *"...it would have saved time for fire and rescue services had they been called to do a service."*

Different perceptions of the level of risk presented to employees by the additional activities emerged, perhaps understandably, differing in accordance with the role of stakeholders. Generally, CFOs considered the guidance being offered by different authorities with regards to COVID-19 a challenge when producing risk assessments because some information was confusing and some conflicted with other information being offered by other authorities. Most adopted the approach taken with regard to National Operational Guidance by choosing to 'adopt, adapt or reject' the risk assessment material, while some did so on a regional basis.

## 8.5 Choice of staff to deliver additional activities

Difficulties and frustrations in negotiating local additional activities and the quantum of additional activities requested by partner agencies influenced the choice of staff to complete the additional work. Many fire and rescue services chose to deploy staff under 'Green Book' conditions of service instead of firefighters, therefore avoiding the need to call on the Agreement. This was upsetting or concerning to some local FBU officials and to firefighters, who felt they were prevented from contributing. At least one CFO felt it important to communicate the crucial role that firefighters performed within their role during the crisis.

*“Having had the initial difficulties with rep bodies all additional services were delivered by Green book staff and Grey book staff felt as if they weren’t doing their bit. Yet these were the very people who were going into houses, and in some cases resuscitating people who actually had COVID-19, so there was a communications exercise [about that] which worked really well.”*

Tensions were reported between on-call staff, who were called on to complete additional activities through working additional hours, and wholetime firefighters who focused on emergency response and did not work overtime on additional activities.

CFOs wished to ensure that all staff were recognised for their contribution to additional activities and not just some groups, including activities beyond those agreed through the Tripartite Agreement.

*“We adopted a ‘can do’ attitude and did things a lot wider than the role maps would suggest we can. We need to widen our role if we are to move in the modern times. I think everybody knows that.”*

*“Some fire and rescue services were braver and did more things they were asked for and “asked for forgiveness later”.*

## 8.6 Role of the FBU

In general, CFOs who spoke positively about their pre-existing relationship with local FBU officials (and in some cases regional officials). They saw the strength and quality of their relationship grow during the crisis, with local officials involved in work planning and providing solutions to challenges presented by local resilience forums and, through regular communications with managers and staff, keeping all parties well informed. One CFO reported how the local FBU officials dealt with COVID-19 communications on their behalf. However, many CFOs felt frustration towards the FBU National Executive. These two quotes reflect some of that feeling:

*“Local relationships with partners and trade unions have been essential. Local relationships were strong and got stronger. FBU was involved in everything so they were aware of all the planning and contributed to it very positively. They found solutions for us on numerous occasions. Local FBU [officials] were very frustrated by the national approach at times where they weren’t able to support us in local work because of the impact from the national FBU. They [local FBU representatives] were part of the decision-making process.”*

*“Rep body inflexibility at a national level and the amount of time and effort that had to be put into negotiation that had to happen at a national level was just quite frankly ridiculous in the middle of an emergency. But I will say, at a local level the level of pragmatism and flexibility was very different and I’m very impressed how [local branch] FBU were prepared to respond.”*

Many CFOs reported what they saw as discord between FBU members and the actions of local, regional or national FBU officials.

*“Although there was some friction with rep bodies, our staff were massively collegiate in a way I’ve never seen before. The ambition to help set the staff at odds with the trade union at times.”*

*“Staff wanted to do more but hampered by the Tripartite Agreement, wanting to go outside the roles and some FBU members did so by setting up separate contracts that covered the role [a secondary employment contract with the council]”.*

## 8.7 Ready, willing and able

On the 15 April, the NFCC launched its campaign ‘Ready Willing and Able’ with the intention of showing how the UK’s fire and rescue services were going the extra mile and taking on additional activities to protect and support their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many fire and rescue services used their social media platforms (#ReadyWillingAble) to showcase their work.

Those CFOs who mentioned the campaign were broadly supportive, especially as it highlighted successes. Some thought it ‘overplayed’ the role of the fire and rescue service and potentially created an expectation that couldn’t be met, in part due to what was seen as restrictions created by the Tripartite Agreement.

*“I loved the strapline ‘ready willing and able. The difficulty is that we needed to do something, yet that wasn’t always possible, so I got frustrated by making offers to our partners that unfortunately I couldn’t see through because of rep body objections.”*

## 8.8 Fire and rescue services in the devolved administrations

Fire and rescue is a devolved matter in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This section reflects the interviews with the three CFOs from Wales and the CFO of Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service.

The experience of English fire and rescue services in interpreting the guidance provided by the Westminster Government when compiling risk assessments and dealing with other matters was further complicated in fire and rescue services within devolved administrations. They were expected to follow advice provided by the devolved administrations, which sometimes differed, as did the timings of briefings delivered by the different administrations.

There was also some frustration in what was seen as a lack of understanding of devolved administration on the part of the Home Office and the different pressures that it brings. While devolved administration fire and rescue services may support the role of the NFCC, the differing expectations on these services mean that the Tripartite Agreement was “slightly unhelpful”, and CFOs suggested that any recommendations here or future work programme of the HMICFRS will need to recognise these pressures and expectations.

## 8.9 Summary

There are mixed opinions on the success and utility of the Tripartite Agreement and its processes. These opinions appeared to vary to some degree in accordance with the following:

- The governance structure of the fire and rescue service and responsibilities of CFOs in each structure: County fire and rescue services, where fire service personnel are employees of the county, were more inclined towards county council direction, and devolved administration fire and rescue services were inclined towards direction from the devolved administration.
- The size of the fire and rescue service: smaller fire and rescue services were generally glad of the support, especially with national risk assessments, while others felt that the Agreement met the needs of larger fire and rescue services with larger FBU memberships.
- The strength and quality of local relationships with representative bodies: those with good local relationships generally appeared to have fewer issues with the Agreement and its processes; however, many still expressed reservations about the role played by the FBU National Executive.
- The mix of trade union representation: those with fewer FBU members and more representation by other trade unions such as the FRSA expressed frustration that the agreement involved only the FBU.
- The experience of CFOs: those with less experience were generally more appreciative of the opportunity to use the activities agreed through the Tripartite Group.
- The local impact of COVID-19 and the impact of requests for support from partner organisations: those where partner organisations made fewer requests, generally had fewer issues.

With these variables in mind, it is perhaps understandable that opinions were mixed. Some CFOs also expressed a view that the current negotiations through the NJC for Local Authority Fire and Rescue services on broadening the role of firefighters had made the negotiation of temporary changes to terms and conditions more problematic, with the FBU perhaps concerned about ceding ground, by normalising some additional activities.

While there were differences of opinion as to whether there should or should not have been a national agreement, the situation was summed up by one CFO who said:

*“Industrial relations have been a challenge. The Tripartite Agreement has been interesting. Now we have got it, some people would say we would have been better off without it but if we hadn’t got it, some would have said we needed it. On balance it was helpful. What was unhelpful was the differences in how it was applied. The intent in setting it up was to allow more decisions to be made locally but I don’t think those benefits played out.”*

## 9. Operations

### 9.1 Fire stations

Commonly, CFOs took early decisions to lock down fire stations to allow them to operate in a bubble, reducing the exposure of their staff to potential infection. New controls were introduced including temperature monitoring, social distancing, increased cleaning routines, moving to paper-based hand over and not allowing staff to move between watches or stations.

In terms of responding to incidents, some CFOs said that they had reduced the number of firefighters on an appliance. Others created capacity by moving apprentices on to watches earlier than anticipated and giving on-call firefighters temporary contracts. While some measures will have helped increase capacity and indeed many CFOs reported planning assumptions based on 20 per cent absence rates, the reality was that availability was high and there were very low levels of sickness.

To maintain competence, some CFOs reported using a new virtual model and carried out training using MS Teams or similar. Examples of virtual training include remote assessments, recruit training and exercises for incident command. It is seen as an efficient way of working and is liked by staff. In some fire and rescue services it is likely to be continued in the longer term.

Others found ways to create socially distant training approaches using fire and rescue service estate. One CFO reported that he continued to run a recruit training course by doing the first three weeks virtually and then bringing recruits onto station with modifications to meet new infection control measures. For some, balancing the need to maintain operational availability and put in place infection controls alongside a lack of supplier availability meant that training was hard to do early in the crisis.

The availability and use of ICT on fire stations varies enormously across the country. One positive outcome of responding to COVID-19 is that fire and rescue services have been able to realise the benefits of digital working and reap rewards of their investment in ICT on fire stations. For others, COVID-19 accelerated the roll out of ICT across their estate. One CFO said, "When COVID-19 kicked off, the IT department's response was brilliant, and we had every station equipped within a week".

Keeping in touch with locked-down fire stations was important for CFOs. There was a range of responses to this new problem: one service provided daily COVID-19 briefings via a service-wide WhatsApp group; another used Zoom for weekly updates from the Chief and many used MS Teams to provide two-way briefing sessions. At an individual level, CFOs were very focused on the welfare of station staff, talking to officers on stations on a regular basis. This is explored further in the Communications section below.

Some CFOs talked about test and trace in the context of future local lockdowns. They are concerned about the impact on fire stations and talk about the need for a nuanced view of emergency service workers given their existing levels of PPE. CFOs said that quick testing for firefighters is vital for continued operational response.



## 9.2 Control room staff

CFOs talked about the need to protect control rooms and placed particular emphasis on managing the resilience of this group of staff. Like their approach to fire stations, CFOs also locked down control rooms early using many of the same measures for infection control. Not all fire and rescue services have their own fire control, with some sharing with police or using a regional control approach as in North West Fire Control. One CFO said that their control room was normally shared with police but had decided to move the fire control staff to a secondary location to set them apart from their police colleagues.

The issue of resilience came up many times during the interviews. Control room staff are highly trained specialists and there are relatively few of them compared with the number of firefighters. With fewer trained control staff to call upon, one service brought in part-time staff who had previously worked in control to provide extra resilience.

In one control room, the CFO said that 9/27 staff were unable to work on site due to a range of reasons but weren't sick themselves. As a result, these staff worked from home and were able to perform 80 per cent of tasks remotely. The CFO reported being very happy with the innovation and ability to deal with staff's changed situation and manage with cyber security issues along the way.

The experience of control room operators is not well covered in these interviews and there is likely to be considerable learning from further research with this staff group.

## 9.3 On-call workforce

Most fire and rescue services have a combination of wholetime and on-call firefighters who work part time in addition to their main employment. The balance of the two work groups varies, but as a general rule, the more rural the service, the more on-call firefighters are employed. On-call firefighters have 'day jobs' but are available for specified periods of time to respond to incidents from a hyper local area associated with individual fire stations.

During lockdown, on-call firefighters found themselves working from home or furloughed from their main employment. This resulted in increased availability to carry out their on-call firefighting. At the same time, fire and rescue services found their wholetime availability also increased.

CFOs talked about the consequences of this situation. First, and most critically, was the need to resolve the issue whereby an on-call firefighter could be available and paid for their part time work while at the same time furloughed from their main employer. This issue was resolved early on through discussions at a national level with government, but it had the potential to cut out a substantial section of the operational workforce and impact the delivery of fire and rescue service core duties.

The issue of pay for on-call firefighters came up in many of the interviews. In one service, the CFO said that they paid their on-call staff day rate payments as a matter of course; in another service, the CFO said they gave on-call staff enhanced payment for duties, treating them well to recognise their long-term commitment to the service. In another example, the service supported on-call staff by using them more and not offering overtime to wholetime staff. This resulted in tension between on-call and wholetime staff as the on-call staff were

used for the voluntary activities (and paid) where wholetime were focused on incident response (and not getting overtime).

While some on-call staff were able to get more experience, many were not because of the high levels of whole-time availability; CFOs reported that on-call staff were not financially worse off as a result of COVID-19.

One CFO said that clearly there were great advantages to improving on-call availability levels but cautioned fire service leaders to be mindful of *why* people were more available, as they may have lost jobs permanently rather than be on a temporary furlough. The CFO went on to share a concern that on-call firefighters who are unemployed and go on to benefits may not be able to continue part time employment an on-call firefighters. Any larger shift in unemployment among on-call firefighters will have a great impact on service delivery in the long term.

Early on in the pandemic, CFOs explored different approaches to crewing as they assumed that on-call (and wholetime) availability would reduce. One CFO talked about a modification to their operational delivery when they brought in trained on-call firefighters on temporary contracts to boost the wholetime workforce by 25. Over time, as availability of staff stayed high and staff infection rates were low, this CFO said, “We had an embarrassment of riches”.

*“We brought back 18 recently retired folk thinking we would need them. They are now on on-call contracts, training weekly. It was still the right thing to do because we may have needed them.”*

On-call staff train on a regular basis to maintain their competence and carry out ‘drill nights’ on fire stations. During the lockdown period, drill nights ceased in many fire and rescue services and training was moved online. In some fire stations, on-call staff continued to carry out training drills but did so in smaller, socially distanced ways. Some CFOs said that they are likely to move to a hybrid training model in the future with some training carried out online, noting that firefighters missed the social interaction of drill nights.

Like the rest of the fire and rescue service workforce, on-call firefighters were keen to volunteer and take on different roles during the pandemic. There were several examples of fire and rescue services seconding on-call firefighters to ambulance services to drive ambulances; some did it less formally with staff reporting real enthusiasm for the opportunity.

One CFO said that their on-call staff attended more than 600 medical incidents by crewing two ambulances. Some fire and rescue services trained on-call staff to drive ambulances but had seen limited demand for their service. With reduced frequency, there is an issue about how to maintain competence in the long term. Another CFO talked about rationalising standards associated with fire engine driving and ambulance driving, highlighting the considerable similarities.

*“We could have used on-call staff even more. They have a real sense of pride and would do pretty much anything for their local communities.”*

This quote sums up the value CFOs place on their on-call firefighters. The pandemic has given fire and rescue service leaders food for thought on how the current delivery model

works. Where the trend to work from home continues (albeit reduced) fire and rescue services will need to consider how to retain and grow an on-call workforce who may have felt more connected to the communities they serve than ever before. This is an area ripe for more qualitative research.

## 10. Fire protection

Fire and rescue services reviewed the activities undertaken by fire protection departments to determine if it would be possible to continue business as usual during the period of lockdown. Fire and rescue staff enter non-domestic buildings for inspection purposes, both for those looking at compliance with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 and for operational assurance visits by local firefighters as part of their duties to review risks in their area.

CFOs reported that fire protection activity was severely curtailed and, in some services, stopped completely. In a few services, a new telephone triage approach was introduced to determine whether a face-to-face visit was required, although the limitations of doing this were a cause for concern.

*“For the desktop safety audit, it didn’t always work. We were too reliant on the information that was given, rather than eyes on.”*

*“There is a need for us be out there advising businesses on how to be COVID compliant without contravening fire safety regulations (one-way systems affecting means of escape etc.)”*

In one service, the CFO talked about the creation of subject-specific cells where the protection cell allowed the service to work virtually with businesses as lockdown restrictions eased. By setting up online seminars focused on business fire safety, the service was able to provide advice and support to over 250 businesses on how to return to a fire-safe and COVID-safe workplace.

Fire protection staff continued to do desktop-based work, including responding to building control consultations and dealing with fire safety issues related to ACM and other external wall systems. Some fire protection staff were redeployed to other roles on a temporary basis, assisting the service where there were additional pressures because of the pandemic.

Ultimately, services adopted a risk-based approach based on the NFCC’s Strategic Intentions: if premises remained open then they were audited. This approach was proven to be appropriate given a number of premises compromised their fire safety arrangements making their premises COVID-secure.

Equally, audits continued on those premises of highest risk – balancing the risk of transmission against the risk of fire post the Grenfell Tower fire and the foreseeable risk in premises with flammable cladding.

## 11. Fire prevention

Like protection work, fire prevention activity was heavily impacted by the lockdown. In some services prevention work ceased altogether whereas others were able to provide a virtual offering and some home visits where the risk was highest, adopting revised safe systems of work including using PPE to make this COVID safe.

COVID-19 forced the move to a virtual Home Fire Safety Visit (HSFV) or Safe and Well visit. There does not appear to have been a consistent approach to doing this but there were many examples of fire and rescue services adopting telephone triage as a starting point. In one service, the CFO said that they had used their logistics cell to distribute smoke alarms based on the results of the triage. It wasn't clear if those staff then fitted the alarms in the home or simply delivered them. Another CFO said that they asked their community safety staff to carry out smoke alarm installation for the highest risk but did so when the resident was not present in the room.

As a result of the reduction in prevention activity, many staff were redeployed to other duties. One CFO reported that staff helped with the delivery of food parcels, distributed PPE, engaged with those clinically at risk as well as supporting the SCG.

New online materials were created by some services which allowed residents to do their own risk assessments. Fire and rescue services used social media to advertise the resources and picked up high risk referrals through this communication and via partners in the Local Resilience Forum. Virtual station open days gave communities the opportunity to find out what goes on in a fire station and provided an outlet for fire safety messaging. This type of engagement is measurable and provides data on the reach of this type of activity.

In one service, the CFO talked about how they had been able to redeploy their local community safety volunteers to develop a befriending service using data provided via the local community hub. With a focus on vulnerable people in the community, the volunteers were able to identify those who may benefit from fire safety advice and refer them on where appropriate.

Looking to the future, one CFO said that now they had learned to do virtual HFSVs, they will be integrating this approach into their IRMP to become a permanent feature going forward. They will also look to use carers in the home to do virtual visits to reduce contact time by fire and rescue staff. Another CFO was more pessimistic about the future, noting that householders would be understandably cautious about letting fire and rescue service personnel into their home for some time, no matter what PPE they are wearing.

The reduction in fire prevention activity is likely to have long lasting impacts. During the interviews, one CFO said that they had focused on the operational side to the detriment of both protection and prevention work leaving a legacy of catch up that will require more resources than they have available. The size of this problem is unknown, but there is clearly a need for fire and rescue services to consider how they can boost fire prevention activity once the pandemic recedes.

## 12. Working from home

The experience of moving to working from home appears to have been largely successful. CFOs report that where there has been investment in ICT infrastructure including software like MS Teams and Workplace this has provided staff with tools to do their job and remain in touch with their colleagues and managers. There were some teething troubles for a few services, but they were resolved quickly. For some CFOs, the move to working from home has accelerated the pace of digital transformation and demonstrated that agile forms of working are possible. It has also started a conversation about rationalising estates and reducing costs in the longer term.

### 12.1 Supporting staff

The speed with which fire and rescue services, along with every other sector, had to transition from office working to working from home presented many challenges. CFOs welcomed the additional COVID-19 funding from government and used it to support home working adaptations. One CFO said that their service assisted the transition to working from home by providing cash to pay for equipment, other CFOs talked about moving equipment from office locations to homes.

CFOs recognised that not all staff had the right environment in which to work from home. Responses to this included the use of online display screen and ergonomic assessments that led the provision of new chairs and other equipment. One CFO said they had helped improve bandwidth availability where it was particularly poor.

There were many references to working culture during the interviews. CFOs talked about how staff accepted quickly the change to their working routines; adapting to working from home and getting used to the technology where previously they had found resistance to changing normal working patterns. Some services carried out staff surveys early on during lockdown to find out what staff needed and made adaptations as a result.

One of the advantages of working from home was the flexibility it gave staff to structure their working day and manage their work life balance around priorities such as childcare or looking after someone who was shielding. A small number of CFOs said that they had classed all staff as Key Workers to gain access to school for their children but found little take up as staff kept their children at home. They were keen to make the point that all staff are critical to running the fire and rescue service.

One CFO reported that their service made the decision to pay a home working allowance to staff. The CFO said that this approach improved staff motivation and productivity. Many CFOs talked about increased productivity during lockdown but tempered this with concerns about staff working longer hours.

For fire and rescue services with a largely rural footprint, there was a considerable benefit in terms of time saved by no longer having to travel many miles to attend meetings or visit fire stations. CFOs worried that a lack of personal contact would be detrimental over time and compensated by, in one case a CFO continuing to do socially distanced station visits or a considerable investment in virtual communications.

CFOs took a pragmatic approach to working from home and recognised that some people couldn't do that, so provided space for that discussion to take place and enable office

working for a handful of staff at the peak of lockdown. Many staff reported missing the workplace and in one instance the CFO said that they had allowed some staff to return but found take up low and for those that did return, there was a realisation that the office environment was not as they remembered it. There is clearly a limitation to the electronic focus of working from home and staff's need to have some face-to-face contact.

*"We flipped to MS Teams very quickly, but we were spending our days from 8 till 6 at night in Teams meetings. We were trying to find the right balance between daily briefings and tasking and allowing people to do things in between. Working from home is good but the lines are blurred between work-life balance. Some staff are sending emails at 10 at night and 6 in the morning. While it might work for them at that moment in time, we have to keep an eye on that work-life balance which is almost impossible to police."*

## 12.2 ICT issues

Fire and rescue services had to invest in new ICT infrastructure and equipment for working from home to work successfully. Some CFOs said that the roll out was relatively smooth particularly where there was an existing culture of agile working, but for many the move was abrupt and difficult to navigate. One CFO talked about spending a week resolving "teething issues", another said it took a few weeks and £50-60k investment in hardware to get all the problems ironed out. Securing access to finance systems was problematic for some as firewalls prevented external access, but this type of problem was quickly overcome.

One CFO said that their service was "digitally challenged" and that the pandemic had sped up a digital transformation that was in its infancy and found that the transfer to working from home (because of money from government) was "a revelation to us all". The point about accelerated digital transformation came up many times.

*"We've done more digital transformation in three weeks than we've seen in 10 years".*

There is substantial investment by fire and rescue services in Microsoft Teams, with most CFOs reporting that they were using it in their service. Some were already mature users, but many found that they sped up the process of adoption early during lockdown. One CFO said that engagement with the workforce through MS Teams (and not just those working from home) has led to a cultural shift that would have taken years to achieve in normal times. Another CFO was cynical initially about MS Teams and virtual working but is a convert now.

## 12.3 Return to the office

Looking forward to a return to work in the office, some CFOs talked about the anxiety of staff who need reassuring that the workplace is COVID-safe. There are some staff who are very keen to return to the office because they miss the social environment. One CFO talked about the emotional resilience of staff and the need for fire and rescue service leaders to not assume everyone reacts in the same way; this CFO talked about setting the tone from the top. CFOs remarked that getting into lockdown may be easier than getting out of it.

One CFO said that the initial enthusiasm for WFH has waned and staff are fatigued although there will be no return to normal, or how it was before. Strategically, the same CFO said,

they are reaffirming a digital first approach and changing their own policies to strengthen this going forward.

A model suggested by one CFO would see a hybrid approach whereby most work takes place at home but where there are benefits from bringing staff together to collaborate on specific activities, then staff would go to the office. One of the positive consequences of the pandemic is innovation and new thinking about how to deliver results.

One CFO talked about the long-term impact of the pandemic.

*“If we have to send people back to home working again, we may see a bigger psychological impact because of the higher levels of uncertainty and how long will we have to deal with this.”*

It is likely in some, if not all, fire and rescue services there will be long term changes to how the workplace is considered, with potential savings to the cost of providing office space for staff. Staff are concerned about their jobs when it’s all over, especially those where adaptations to shift balance from office to home may have greatest impacts such as reception or mailroom staff.

## 13. Communications

The pandemic provided an opportunity for fire and rescue services to experiment with new models of communication. The abrupt move to working from home, explored in the section above, meant that staff were geographically dispersed and separated from their own teams and managers. At the same time, the lockdown of fire stations into 'bubbles' increased the isolation of operational staff. The importance of communications emerged strongly from the interviews.

*"From our perspective, the daily comms with a very simple set of principles, has created a really collegiate atmosphere and people feel like they are in it together."*

The investment made in Microsoft Teams by large numbers of fire and rescue services led to managers communicating with their staff in a completely different way. While the use of MS Teams was extensive among non-operational staff, many CFOs said that the infrastructure on fire stations supported the use of MS Teams as well, so they were able to reach all work groups in the same way. Other examples of communications software included Zoom, WhatsApp, Skype and Workplace. Some services used a combination of channels.

One of the benefits of virtual communication, regardless of how it was done, was the speed with which CFOs could communicate with their staff at a time when working in a fast-changing environment. Although some interviewees cautioned against information overload and were conscious of the frequency of their communications across all channels. They wanted to avoid information fatigue.

Often CFOs used video to communicate with staff, hosting live streams and then making them available on local intranets or on YouTube. Some of the CFOs took questions during live streams, others broadcast video messages and covered topics based on feedback provided in advance.

*"We took a view that it was important to explain the rationale for decisions to help staff understand better."*

CFOs still used slow time communications, continuing to write blogs, send emails and use existing internal communications approaches.

A few CFOs talked about the need for the fire and rescue service leadership to maintain visibility with weekly virtual calls one way to achieve this.

*"My Zoom 'Chats with the CFO', which I ran every week worked well. I've seen/spoken to some people more than I would ordinarily during business as usual."*

Many CFOs used staff surveys to gather feedback on how they felt during the crisis. This wasn't purely aimed at office-based staff but included all work groups. The results of the surveys allowed CFOs to modify and adapt practices in many areas and then share this with staff through the all-staff communications channels. In one service, the CFO commissioned an independent performance review of response part way through the pandemic-based interviews with a sample group of staff.



*“This was done primarily to ensure we were looking after staff regarding safety and their mental health and we tweaked our communications accordingly.”*

*“Explaining what we were doing throughout brought staff together as never before. We brought in an independent company to survey our staff and we currently have a 97% approval rating from staff. By bringing people together in a type of war time type setting, and communicating with them constantly, they feel part of a bigger effort, which they are.”*

Innovations in communication weren't limited to CFOs sharing information, there were examples of staff coming together to take part in online quizzes, coffee mornings and other more social gatherings. All of these used the investment in technology to reduce isolation in all settings and provide that 'water cooler' opportunity to chat, gossip and take a break from the day-to-day routine.

*“Get the communications with staff right; have a single point of contact in each part of the workplace to allow for consistent flow of messages through the organisation.”*

In addition to communications within fire and rescue services, CFOs were dealing with vast amounts of information from external organisations: from partners within the LRF, from the NFCC and from government departments. The issue of daily government briefings came up time after time.

*“The biggest challenge has been how the national arrangements (not NFCC) has been isolated and disconnected regarding what was happening at a local level. Briefing to the country at 7:00pm about things they expect to happen from sometimes midnight or nine o'clock the following morning, that we nothing about as an SCG was just ridiculous.”*

## 14. Data

Data was mentioned by many interviewees. In some cases, it was in the context of too much data, for others there was a paucity. The failure to join up in terms of how to share data between organisations or a demand for data where the end was not clear and frustrated interviewees in equal measure.

### 14.1 Informing decision making

Fire and rescue services used data to inform decision making throughout the duration of the pandemic. Using their own data, fire and rescue services could plan and manage their resources. One CFO talked about the power of real time data to inform decisions and how their use of Microsoft's Power BI had been integral to understanding sickness absence and manage changes to service delivery in a very agile way.

Another CFO bemoaned the complexity of the modelling done by health partners and sought more pragmatic and local analysis as a response to feeling "lost in a fog of data".

Using information available at a national level frustrated many interviewees who said that their local public health colleagues were not able to provide data to them because it was not being released a national level. It is not clear what the specifics were here, but for future planning, fire and rescue services may benefit from considering what data they do need that is held at a national level, how it informs decision making at a local level and how it can be accessed at times of crisis.

### 14.2 Data sharing

Not all data is owned by fire and rescue services and access to it varied hugely. For county fire and rescue services, access to non-fire datasets held by the local authority appeared to be much easier because they are a department of the county council. Interviewees from county fire and rescue services described in very positive terms how being part of the county council improved their access to data and as a result their decision making, particularly when it came to a joined-up approach to helping vulnerable people in their communities.

Co-locating fire and public health in the council improved decision making for county fire and rescue services, but it was not always immediate. One interviewee from a county fire and rescue service said that there was lots of data available but that it was not driving decision making. By putting groups of data analysts from fire, public health and other local partner organisations, they were able to create what they called "one version of the truth". It took three iterations to get this right as well as some lobbying of central government to get access to the right public health data that could be used at a local level.

Outside of the county council governance model, getting access to data to inform decision making varied across fire and rescue services. Some found it easy to access and others needed to put in data sharing agreements – the latter proving harder to do in some areas than others.

"It shouldn't take a crisis for us to share data," advised one CFO who went on to describe how initially their service had struggled to get hold of partner data to inform decision making related to identifying vulnerable households. In this case, the blockage was removed

once the fire and rescue service offered to help the partner organisation and they could see the immediate benefits.

Working more closely together to manage a common problem helped fire and rescue services access data and the LRF structures brought partners together in many ways, but there does not appear to be a common approach to dealing with data sharing in times of crisis. “The shackles were dropped because of the emergency,” said one CFO. Getting the balance right between following the right governance and procedures relating to data sharing and being responsive during a pandemic was a challenge and would benefit from review to see whether guidance and practice can be improved in the future.

### 14.3 Data requests

Almost every fire and rescue service interviewee talked about the data requests they received from the NFCC. One CFO said that at one point this service received seven daily requests. It was resource intensive to service the requests and was, in their view, distracting from their wider response. It was described by a different CFO as a bit of a burden and only towards the later stages of the response phase did it lessen up.

Another CFO questioned the need for the frequency of returns and whether the data was actually needed. “Not sure the beast we were feeding knew what it was to be used for.” Not knowing what would be done with the data and how that would improve their own response at a local level was clearly a frustration for many.

Duplication of requests for data returns was another complaint. “Let’s just collect it once” suggested one CFO. It wasn’t just the NFCC asking for data, there were requests from the Home Office, from MHCLG, from the Local Resilience Forum and from the Devolved Administrations.

*“I fully support a single source [of information] and so if we sent everything into the NFCC, whatever that means, and anyone who wants data then goes to that portal, that would take a significant amount of pressure off.”*

## 15. Role of the NFCC

### 15.1 Convening and communicating

There was an overwhelmingly positive response by CFOs to the support, leadership and guidance provided by the NFCC during the pandemic. Interviewees repeatedly said how well supported they felt in terms of the Gold command arrangements, access to members of the NFCC leadership team and they commended the weekly virtual meetings of CFOs. Many commented on the efficiency of using virtual communication tools like MS Teams for all their NFCC interactions.

*“We got direct support from the NFCC and the people within it, which was really helpful. The level of professional support on a formal and informal basis and the fact there as a body like the NFCC to go to gain any guidance we needed was really helpful.”*

Some of the CFOs thought that the response to the pandemic demonstrated how far the NFCC had come as an organisation in terms of its maturity. “The NFCC is, I think, a million miles up the road from where the old CFOA was.” The pandemic response has really increased the positive reputation of the NFCC. They commended the way that the NFCC brought fire and rescue service together to share information to and from government and other sources through a weekly CFO call.

The Ready, Willing, Able campaign received mixed reviews, with some saying it was good and others saying it overplayed the role of the fire and rescue service. Some CFOs thought the focus should be on demonstrating that the fire and rescue service kept doing its day job – the core duties – despite the pandemic.

There were a couple of examples of CFOs who thought that the NFCC didn’t always recognise the impact that different governance models have on how fire and rescue services operate. The county council arrangement and the services working for devolved administrations were both highlighted.

### 15.2 Strategic intentions

Apart from the first eight interviews, all CFOs were asked about the NFCC’s Strategic Intentions (SI) and whether they had been useful at a local level. CFOs were largely positive about the SI, many remarking that they provided a good benchmark for their own local SI and a reassurance that they were being consistent.

*“At our initial local Gold meetings, we wrote 5 or 6 strategic objectives which we benchmarked against the NFCC strategic intentions when they arrived a week or so later. It was reassuring to see that we were moving in the right direction.”*

For those who had not yet drafted a local set of SI, the NFCC SI were a useful start.

*“We produced our own set of strategic intentions and it was influenced by what came from the NFCC and so were helpful.”*

Where the work on SI by the fire and rescue service was more advanced, the NFCC SI were less useful.

*“They were a little late to the party. We drafted our SI before then, so we had to review to make sure they were still in line with the NFCC ones. That wasn’t a criticism, things were moving very fast. They were helpful but more a reassurance than anything else. It wasn’t that different, if they had been, I would have questioned whether we had got it wrong or took it back to the NFCC as to whether they had got it wrong.”*

*“To be honest, I didn’t refer to them when responding to the crisis, because it was the here and now, we treated it like an incident and structured the accordingly. However, through all of the work of the NFCC with all of the briefings and communications going back and forth, we did satisfy them naturally and aligned by accident.”*

### 15.3 Procurement

The NFCC procurement hub based in Kent Fire and Rescue Service played an important part in the response to the pandemic. One CFO commented that the approach to procurement demonstrated how the fire and rescue service really can work together.

Many CFOs talked about how they had used the hub to access supplies of PPE for their staff. In one service, the CFO said they ran a just in time approach to supply and had to evolve this as they “rapidly ran out” and needed to call on the NFCC’s procurement hub to assist. Another CFO said that they had PPE stocks in place early on and were able to offer some to local partners and found they had good support from the procurement hub when required. One of the CFOs was concerned about a long wait for orders of PPE to arrive and questioned about the resilience of the supply chain.

### 15.4 Guidance

The NFCC provided a wide range of guidance, including risk assessments for fire and rescue services to support their response to the pandemic. There was mixed feedback from the CFOs.

Several CFOs said that it was good to have national guidance to avoid having different approaches in every service. The range of guidance was commended by many with one CFO commenting that the guidance has been extremely helpful.

*“Things were running at such a pace we couldn’t be as thorough as we would have wanted; we took some guidance as read and put it into place locally, so it took some pressure off us”.*

*“The NFCC guidance allowed us to pick through all of this information and put it on the table for my service. We took the National Operational Guidance approach of ‘adopt adapt or reject’. We adopted this approach and rejected none of the guidance, rather we tailored it to our local circumstances. For a service like us, with limited resources it helped.”*

Some found it too detailed, but most talked about the benefits of having clear, consistent guidance at a national level. “Guidance issued by the NFCC has been useful, but it doesn’t all need to be followed all the time.” There was one reference to the NFCC’s guidance regarding operational PPE conflicting with that from Public Health England.

*“We were expected to deal with county council policies alongside the NFCC’s and sometimes the guidance from the NFCC provided different interpretations, e.g. PPE, the type of masks needed. For a combined service that would probably have been much clearer; for us as a county, it gave us an extra element to juggle.”*

In one interview, the CFO talked about how individual services were sharing examples of their own guidance.

*“We wanted to get examples out and when it went through the NFCC there is a question as to whether it was NFCC policy or a service’s, whereas it was just an opportunity to share an example. This caused a bit of confusion. We had to consider whether we were okay with our arrangements or adopt what others had done. What we might have done different was push that through a filtering and validating and then badging process and published as an NFCC position rather than sharing individual examples of fire and rescue service positions.”*

## 16. The view from the stakeholders

Separate from the interviews carried out with CFOs, the COVID-19 Committee sought the views of fire and rescue service stakeholders to provide a rounded picture of the overall response to the pandemic.

Seven themes emerged from the interviews with stakeholders. The first six are detailed below, followed by the more extensive feedback on the Tripartite Agreement in its own section.

### 16.1 Motivation to support

Across all interviews, stakeholders commended the *“can do attitude”* shown by fire and rescue services in seeking to support partner agencies. Home Office representatives noted that fire and rescue services were doing *“really good stuff”* to support the response and the Home Secretary was *“genuinely quite impressed”* and *“knew that was a good sign of the impact they made internally across the piece”*.

*“My overall view would be very good, very helpful, very willing to assist and keen to explore what they could do to support us.”*

*“This pandemic response has been a good example of what the fire service can do to support other agencies to produce additional capacity and that certainly worked well here.”*

AACE representatives highlighted that although issues such as *“agreements over pay”* could sometimes slow the implementation of agreements for joint working practices under normal circumstances, there has been a drive to find ways of *“getting things done quickly and at pace”* during the pandemic. Although there were disparities in level of support requests made by Local Resilience Forums (LRFs), there was a shared goal of identifying *“what we can do to support COVID-19 response in the immediacy”*.

In particular, stakeholders noted how *“outstanding”* the support with driving ambulances had been for increasing availability to respond to calls. While AACE representatives felt further consideration would be needed to adopt this type of support as standard, they believed it made a *“substantial impact”* during events of national significance.

*“If you wanted to hang your hat on one thing that fire did that had real impact it would be the provision of drivers which enabled us to put a number of fire operated ambulances on the road because we’d split the clinicians. We had one clinician and one fire service driver. There are some risks that go alongside that and there are some patients that you would really want a second clinician on hand but in the circumstances, you know, needs must, it made a substantial impact.”*

With regard to wider community support, some regions were noted as being more proactive than others, engaging in activities such as delivering food parcels to the elderly and conducting welfare checks. However, views differed with regard to whether the fire and rescue service was the appropriate agency to provide this support. Union representatives were in favour, whereas LGA representatives noted that some LRF requests were more appropriate for community volunteers to undertake than a professional workforce.

*“It’s about having a professional workforce and I say that because there were some requests that frankly weren’t appropriate for a professional workforce. They were more appropriate for lay volunteers to be doing. For example, delivering groceries.”*

## 16.2 Capacity

Across stakeholders, there was a common perception that fire and rescue services had maintained their capacity to deliver core functions with regard to call responding. Indeed, union representatives noted that response times had improved during lockdown due to a combination of *“increased availability from on-call firefighters and reduced traffic and calls”*. Home Office representatives felt that because the NFCC had provided quick reassurance about ability to maintain core functions, discussions were able to *“swiftly move onto how they could provide support to other partner agencies”*.

*“In terms of the day-to-day response, I would say it was probably better than the norm... We found that the availability of the on-call appliances was better than it’s been in 15 years so in terms of being able to maintain your core function that wasn’t hindered at all. There were more people available than normal.”*

In the initial response phase of the pandemic, fire and rescue services had to quickly step down a number of prevention and protection activities in order to minimise risk of infection. This *“change of capacity”* allowed them to *“switch focus to providing support for COVID.”*

However, Home Office representatives questioned how dynamic and flexible fire and rescue services were in reintroducing these activities post-lockdown. Some regions had quickly sought alternative approaches, such as delivering fire safety advice via telephone and desk-based inspections. Nevertheless, lack of national picture on how this was being managed across regions raised uncertainty regarding how widespread these activities were, and whether learning was being shared regarding *“how to move up and down quite nimbly depending on what is needed”*.

## 16.3 On-call firefighters

One common reason given for fire and rescue services being able to maintain core callout functions and provide support to partner agencies was the greater availability of on-call firefighters. Regardless of whether or not they were furloughed from their main occupation, On-call firefighters *“juggled things around in their normal lives to make themselves available”*.

However, there were barriers to making use of on-call firefighters. For example, issues arose regarding paying on-call firefighters for work when they were already receiving furlough payments, which created a risk that this skilled workforce would not be utilised. Home Office representatives noted that due to regular communications with the NFCC, this issue was rapidly escalated, allowing them to *“very quickly speak to HMIC and provide the NFCC with reassurance that it was important to make use of on-call firefighters”*.

Nevertheless, feedback from union representatives indicated that there had still been income losses for on-call firefighters. They are paid based on callout activity and the



combination of reduced calls and some services adopting “lower ridership levels” on appliances, meant fewer callouts.

The FRSA and the NFCC worked together to put forward a proposal for on-call firefighters to receive the average income they earned in the 12 weeks prior to the pandemic to increase security and maintain on-call levels, along with a number of other options. However, feedback from unions indicated that “only some services adopted this while others did not”, which created disparities in how on-call firefighters were treated across regions.

#### 16.4 Communication and co-ordination

Across stakeholders, communication and coordination were identified as being crucial to response effectiveness. Examples of effective communication included daily calls between the Home Office and the Committee to set the tone and rhythm for the day. Similarly, daily calls between the Committee Lead and the NFCC chair was noted as being important during the early stages. In both instances, these regular communications allowed organic issues to be quickly identified and dealt with.

*“The structures they put in place to ensure communications with all the services was really good. So, the rhythm of gold meetings that Phil chaired I think helped people.”*

Union representatives also noted that in some regions, CFOs and senior managers provided regular staff updates and hosted online meetings to facilitate open question and answer sessions, which allowed them to identify support needs for staff struggling to work from home. There were also examples of effective coordination between unions and fire and rescue services in providing welfare support to staff, including developing wellbeing programmes and altering policy so that absences resulting from COVID-19 illness would not be included on sickness absence records.

*“Positives included regular updates from Chiefs and senior managers and online meetings, open interactive Q&As with Chiefs, support to go back into the office where possible where staff were struggling working from home.”*

*“Making sure COVID-19 sickness wasn’t included in wider attendance policies. There were also really great examples of wellbeing programmes being set up for staff during lockdown with managers working with unions to develop this.”*

However, communication difficulties were also noted across stakeholders. LGA representatives highlighted that while communication within LRFs appeared to be effective, requests for support were being passed up to the Tripartite Group without any form of central “clearing house” to help “provide clarity in understanding the scale of things and then how quickly it needed to be done”. This created issues for prioritising the order in which activities should be negotiated for Tripartite Agreement amendments.

Union representatives of Green book staff in some regions also noted issues with some managers “dismissing safety concerns about travelling on public transport”. This left them feeling that their wellbeing was not a priority and that their concerns were less important.

More broadly, comments were raised about the NFCC providing “*some quality assurance on the information going out*” and ensuring that CFOs and Committee chairs did not send information out “*before they have been consulted on with anyone else*”, such as details regarding workforce structure.

Similarly, comments were raised about the importance of the Government seeking operational input from emergency services prior to issuing policies that may affect frontline working in order to understand their impact and avoid having “*holes in them*”, including those relating to transport.

## 16.5 Relationships

Relationships were also noted as being important to response effectiveness. Communication and coordination were improved when there was trust and familiarity between key representatives from across agencies. For example, AACE representatives noted “*more of an affinity*” with the fire and rescue service, and that work focusing on collaboration between emergency services over the past few years had been “*beneficial for providing the groundwork and needs to continue during the pandemic*”. In regions where fire and rescue and ambulance services had particularly strong relationships, a wider range of support was provided, including assistance with slips and trips.

*“What helped was that it was already build on a bedrock of good relationships...Good, solid, existing trusting relationships with colleagues in fire in particular, and historically every ambulance service in the country had a good relationship with fire around responding schemes and the such like, so the relationships were there already. We found it really easy to pick up those national relationships.”*

LGA representatives commented that the pre-existing relationships they had with the FBU helped to ease the process of negotiating the Tripartite Agreement. Their experience of developing agreements to broaden the work of the fire and rescue service, and firefighter health and safety meant that negotiations were not starting from the ground, albeit the context was different. They felt this provided a good understanding of the FBU and areas where support may be agreed.

*“National employers had already been having those discussions, so a lot of the groundwork had already been done so we weren’t starting with a blank sheet of paper as such. I think that was really key in being able to turn things around very quickly so cut out the need for all of those discussions. We already knew the sort of things that the workforce reps would be comfortable with.”*

However, both LGA and NFCC representatives commented that relationships between the NFCC and FBU could be “*challenging*” and had the potential to lead to “*unrealistic expectations*” for negotiating the Tripartite Agreement. For example, the NFCC initially sought to negotiate an agreement with the FBU without including the LGA with whom the FBU already have an established relationship. Similarly, feedback from the NFCC representative highlighted that CFOs felt they were “*asking for local flexibility*” in the Tripartite Agreement so that regional needs could be addressed as they arose, with staff being rapidly deployed to support responses to the fast-paced, dynamic crisis. They felt that

the National Employers did not always share the view that agreements needed to be negotiated quickly to provide rapid support during this particular period of crisis where there was a need for CFOs to be able to deploy staff in a timely way.

In addition, whereas the fire and rescue service have good relationships with Home Office, ambulance and police services, comments highlighted that greater focus is needed in developing relationships with Public Health England (PHE).

## 16.6 Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Feedback highlighted issues with access to PPE, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic. There were disparities across regions, with *“some services being PPE rich and some being PPE poor”*, resulting in inconsistencies for when Green book and Grey book staff were able to wear PPE. For example, in some regions, firefighters could wear PPE when on pumps or in close quarters, while in other regions they could not. Similarly, there were issues for some fleet technicians with regard to being able to wear face coverings and maintain social distancing.

*“So, there would be crews sitting on appliances without facemasks and you could only use them if you had to use them. You compare that with [another region] where it was just not an issue at all, there was plenty of PPE. You could use them on appliances and at incidents.”*

*“Fire services have got to be more joined up. How is it possible that one service can have hardly any PPE and other services had lots of PPE? It’s as if it’s a postcode lottery as to how safe you are as a firefighter. It’s absolutely bonkers.”*

Questions were also raised regarding the systems in place for managing PPE and how accurately individual services kept records of stock and consumption. Home Office representatives highlighted that the national procurement hub was a *“fairly new body”* set up to *“quickly provide a national picture on PPE requirements and demand”* and that there was now a national system for fire and rescue services to report into. However, the effectiveness of the support provided regarding distribution of PPE would be dependent on how effective individual services were at maintaining accurate stock records.

*“Did we get the distribution right? I think they did a cracking job and it was right that they protected themselves, but I really struggled to get a sense of individual services, they clearly have no effective stock systems. I couldn’t go to XX and say, ‘what is your stock, what is your daily consumption or how many days have you got left?’”*

In addition, feedback highlighted the challenges created by constantly changing guidance on PPE across emergency services, which added to difficulties in both sourcing PPE and knowing when to use it. These issues were exacerbated by emergency services getting advice from different sources. AACE representatives commented that the ambulance service was at an advantage in being part of the NHS, as this gave them direct links to PHE.

In contrast, fire and rescue and police services did not have a single point of contact within PHE and liaising with local Public Health directors led to differences across regions and services. They noted that as a result of arranging a joint emergency services meeting with

PHE, fire and rescue and police services now have a single point of contact, which may improve the consistency in advice moving forward.

## 16.7 The Tripartite Agreement

Details regarding how the agreement came into existence are provided in section 8 above.

LGA representatives noted that rather than having multiple discussions across regions to negotiate support agreements, it was *“more efficient to deal with it at a national level, to talk about it just once”* but that *“there should always be local flexibility”*.

Across LGA, Home Office, Ambulance, and NFCC representatives, the Tripartite Agreement was noted as being *“absolutely crucial”* to providing support to partner agencies. It provided a set of agreements in relation to support requests made by LRFs and was therefore *“based on what communities actually needed rather than pondering on what communities needed”*.

In particular, LGA, Home Office, Ambulance, and NFCC representatives noted that the first version of the Agreement, which focused on ambulance support, transporting deceased, and vulnerable people, worked well. This was driven from the bottom up by a few CFOs in areas like London where there was a clear need for support to deal with ambulance calls. These local agreements provided a platform for developing national agreements so that similar support could be provided across regions where required and where fire and rescue services had the capacity to do so.

*“My sense was local FBU committees were nervous about doing it and the tripartite basically removed a whole set of barriers and the first three were really worthwhile.”*

There was also a sense that the urgency brought about by the pandemic provided a push to get agreements in place that had not been possible during the previous three years. In this respect, the Tripartite Agreement represented progress in trade negotiations to improve the level of support the fire and rescue service was able to provide to partner agencies.

*“Without COVID-19 there wouldn’t have been that degree of pressure to get things done and it was becoming obvious that COVID-19 was going to get a lot worse before it got better.”*

*“It gave a deadline. I felt under a degree of pressure because we needed to have this done and the Employers needed to show that they could do it. The NHS and particularly the Ambulance service were under that much strain, but it did need the FBU reminding that no one is going to forgive or forget them if they don’t do a deal. It wasn’t meant to be threatening, it was just stating the obvious.”*

### 16.7.1 Decision delay and inertia

While the initial iteration of the Tripartite Agreement was viewed as important for enabling support to be provided to partner agencies, questions were raised by LGA, Home Office, Ambulance, and NFCC representatives about whether it could have been implemented earlier. For example, comments suggested that support with driving ambulances came *“slightly after the peak in quite a lot of areas”*. Overall, there was a sense that had negotiations begun earlier support could have been in place ahead of the infection peak.

Both LGA and NFCC respondents noted that not having the LGA involved in initial discussions with the FBU had delayed reaching an initial agreement. Home Office and NFCC representatives also commented that additional pressure was needed to ensure that FBU and LGA reached an initial agreement quickly. AACE respondents noted that some delays emanated from “*FBU understandably wanting to ensure risk assessments and appropriate training*” would be in place, but that this also created some challenges for ensuring barriers were not created in regions where firefighters were already providing support.

*“I think the employers were a bit slow to the table and needed a bit of arm twisting to push the FBU hard because there was a bit of an issue where I had to ring up the lead employer...and say you know fire couldn’t step up for the wider stuff and the spending outcome for the wider sector was going to be pretty bleak because I’d have no basis to justify it.”*

*“Not unreasonably, the FBU nationally were pressing the NFCC for things like risk assessments and if we are going to provide things like drivers for ambulances, what does the training look like... The trick was to be able to provide something that supported that without inadvertently setting the barrier higher than a trust and a fire service had already been able to agree locally.”*

Despite fire and rescue services being willing and capable of providing support, stakeholders felt the Tripartite Agreement sometimes slowed or prevented this at local levels. The NFCC, Home Office, AACE and union representatives all commented that the “*FBU and the Employers to a great extent, would not support local arrangements unless they were agreed nationally*” and that “*regional and national officials would not let local branches make agreements*”.

Some CFOs felt they had to run all support decisions past the Tripartite Group because making decisions that went outside of activities specified in the national agreement ran the risk of “*the FBU telling their representatives not to provide this support*”.

The NFCC and LGA representatives felt some regions pushed decisions up to the Tripartite Group that could have been dealt with at a local level, “*like the packing of food boxes*” and “*the assembly of face masks*”, whereas other regions undertook activities such as “*driving GPs to appointments*” without seeking national approval. The latter approach was viewed to be a “*much better attitude than trying to get everything agreed at a national level*”. However, stakeholders acknowledged the difficulty and sensitivity of negotiating work agreements.

*“The only obstacle was one of time. In an ideal world, if you’re an LRF and you ask your Chief Fire Officer for support, they would be able to give a decision there and then. However, Chiefs had to run this past FBU to gain support or FBU would tell their representatives not to provide this support until or unless there was an agreement.”*

*“If you read up to TPA 4 or 5, it was a framework within which people worked and could do local agreements and as long as local risk assessments, PPE and training etc. were in place they could get on with it, but after what happened*

*with XX and a couple of other instances, it all became very rigid and the region and national officials would not let local branches make agreements.”*

*“Fire tend to proceed with caution where we might be a bit more agile with making quick decisions that are a bit riskier. That might be the legacy of relationships they have with the FBU and hurdles they have to jump over with them.”*

Questions were also raised regarding whether fire and rescue services *“provided all of the assistance that they could”*. All stakeholders commented that negotiating amendments to the Tripartite Agreement was a very slow process, and that the amount of time and effort required sometimes outweighed the benefits. Whereas key representatives from the NFCC and LGA have greater autonomy to make decisions on behalf of their organisations, the FBU makes decisions collectively, which stakeholders felt caused delays. Often, by the time amendments were made, partner agencies had either found an alternative avenue of support or the nature of the rapidly altering situation rendered the support out-of-date.

*“It then got bogged down I think in a bit of boring negotiating processes... I’m sure the FBU have their own perspective as do the Employers on how those things went but it seemed to then get very slow and drawn out and quite marginal benefit for a huge amount of work... There was a point where it tipped and stopped things happening at a local level.”*

*“At its worst point, I spent 9 hours on TPA 9 (or 10) because every word had to be negotiated. [Despite this], I think it still has more benefits than downsides. The NJC are now saying it is a good example of how national arrangements can work to help bring in change. My view is that the latter part of the agreement, I think is the worst example of the NJC where it’s too rigid and all negotiated nationally. It doesn’t allow local flexibility.”*

As a result, union representatives highlighted that their members felt frustrated. They wanted to be able to provide support to partner agencies but delays to agreements were preventing them from being able to do so.

*“There are a number who would like to have got involved sooner. I’ve had e-mails from one branch rep saying instead of helping ambulance service we’re out in the yard practicing knots and lines when we could’ve been doing something more important. All of the firefighters were wanting to help and were feeling very frustrated because there was no agreement in place.”*

Union and AACE representatives also noted that delays were not the result of Green book and Grey book staff disputing pay, but rather a *“lack of flexibility”* in being able to deal with dynamic situations as and when they arose, which *“created barriers that did not need to be there”*. The majority of stakeholders commented that barriers to negotiating support agreements at a regional level had compromised ability to make quick decisions to offer support to meet local needs.

*“Should’ve had the flexibility to deal with situations as and when they arose, obviously providing PPE and risk assessments for anything you’re going to*

*come across and you know deal with it as you do in your day to day work. It was over officious and bureaucratic.”*

*“One of the areas we were looking at, had it continued at the scale it was for much longer, was responding to uninjured fallers. There are all sorts of implications around that in terms of patient safety and what categories can they go to and how do they get remote support in backing them up if they go to these phone calls and that sort of thing but it’s doable and it has been done in one of our trust. We built on what they’ve already set up and again I think it was the noises from the unions that were reluctant to push that forward in any way. It may well have been taken up locally I think had that not been the case. Nevertheless, it can be done but maybe trying to do it in extremis, some of the concerns have been exacerbated.”*

#### 16.7.2 Lack of parity in consulting with unions

The biggest issue to be raised by union representatives was the lack of parity in consultations with unions regarding the Tripartite Agreement. LGA representatives noted that only the FBU were consulted because *“the NJC is done on a proportional representation basis and there isn’t enough representation in any of the other unions apart from the middle managers to justify a place on the 14-member group of the NJC”*. However, union representatives noted that their members felt they were being treated as *“second-class citizens”* because *“only FBU members have representation and have their voices heard”*.

Union representatives also noted a lack of communication about the existence of the Tripartite Agreement until it was released. As a result, they were unable to provide information to address their members’ questions because they only became aware of the agreement at the same time as the rest of the nation. They felt that even if it were not possible to include them in consultations, being kept informed and having a two-way dialogue regarding the existence and amendments to the agreement would have reduced members’ frustrations and may also have helped to identify solutions to problems.

*“We didn’t know anything about that [Tripartite Agreement] until, well, I heard about it on the news so there was no ‘just calling you up to let you know what’s going on behind the scenes, this is what we’re doing’. Doesn’t matter whether we agree with it or not, that’s courtesy, that’s respectfulness in terms of giving people a heads up... I was being inundated or Head Office was being inundated with requests for information and I didn’t have them because I didn’t know anything about it.”*

*“Does it have to be like this? Why are we not all communicating? We haven’t all got the answers but let’s all share ideas. We want to know what’s going on without any committal to being directly involved. But it just does not happen.”*

*“The door was just shut on us. We didn’t have the opportunity to get involved, we were just totally excluded, and still are by the way excluded from any national discussion regarding the tripartite agreement. There’s just nothing.”*

As a result of lack of wider consultation, a large number of Green book and Grey book staff were impacted by an agreement they had no representation in developing, which made

them *“question the inclusivity of the fire and rescue service”*. Union representatives highlighted that on-call firefighters and Green book staff were often the ones providing support to partner agencies but had no union representing them in the Tripartite Agreement, leading to a *“disconnect”*. As a result, Green book staff sometimes ended up being *“sent into situations where they don’t know what they don’t know and are not equipped to risk assess, to know what PPE to wear, how to manage the situation”*.

*“What makes it even more perverse and wrong is that when you look back at the people who helped the NHS, which I’m led to believe is about 4,000, predominantly they would be on-call, so predominantly they’ll be our members... You’ve got a situation where you’ve got an agreement that is going to impact on our members, and we’ve had absolutely no input whatsoever. That is fundamentally wrong.”*

*“For our members it would be really gratifying I think to have that national recognition, professional recognition of the work that support staff do because they don’t get that very often.”*

Union representatives also noted regional variations in how wedded fire and rescue services were to the Tripartite Agreement. In some regions there was greater flexibility, with everybody being *“treated the same, getting the same heads up, being invited to the same meetings, and having the same opportunity to comment and shape any document, plan or project, which is how it should be”*. These regions either did not need a Tripartite Agreement because of strong pre-existing relationships and mutual support between agencies prior to the pandemic, or they came up with their own separate agreements, using the Tripartite Agreement as a *“skeleton but Chiefs in these regions knew what their firefighters would be willing to do and were able to offer better support to other agencies such as Ambulance”*.

In contrast, where regions followed the Tripartite Agreement *“to the letter with approval being sought over everything, less support was offered to other agencies and this was slowed”*.

*“The Tripartite Agreement was used in some regions to not do something even though if you read it the document looks empowering. For example, some firefighters being told by FBU and their station manager that they could not be on-call and provide support to the NHS because they would be spreading COVID-19. They actually lost money helping the NHS.”*

Union representatives commented that had there been wider consultation over the Tripartite Agreement, a more flexible approach might have been developed. They noted that their unions existed to *“deal with the issues that their members want them to deal with”* and that feedback from their members was that they wanted to be able to *“provide flexible support to ensure an effective pandemic response and safer communities”*.

### 16.7.3 Infrastructure and flexibility

Feedback from across all stakeholders highlighted that there are likely to be some different challenges moving forward. For example, second or third waves may not hit the whole of the UK at once. This will make it all the more essential to have greater flexibility in implementing support agreements that can be adapted for local needs rather than needing



to come through the Tripartite Group. LGA representatives noted that the latest version of the Tripartite Agreement is “*pretty comprehensive as it is*” and that new requests from LRFs are likely to be “*so specific to a local area that the logic is that it remains a local issue*”.

*“I think we probably want to see more flexibility now going forward, not looking back, because it’s a different context looking forward. We’d probably be interested in more flexibility for things to happen at a local level and not need to come through the Tripartite Group. But that’s more driven by, it’s pretty comprehensive as it is so you know, what else is going to come up and is what else comes up going to be so specific to a local area that the logic is that it remains a local issue and we would assist of course with doing that.”*

Stakeholder feedback also indicated that, in theory, ability to step up support for partner agencies in relation to activities detailed in the existing Tripartite Agreement should be quicker as these agreements have been tried and tested, and risk assessments and training are already in place. This will be particularly important for providing crucial support with driving ambulances in order to save lives.

*“There is now a cadre of firefighters who can just step in to drive an ambulance and some agreements about how that’s done and tried and tested logistics so in theory they should be able to respond much faster to it to avoid access deaths, so you’d hope they could swing into action a lot faster.”*

## 16.8 Summary

Feedback from across stakeholders highlights that fire and rescue services were both willing and capable of providing support to partner agencies while still maintaining their core functions. They felt the idea behind setting up the Tripartite Agreement was sound, and the initial iteration was beneficial for enabling essential support with driving ambulances and transporting the deceased.

However, the Tripartite Agreement also posed challenges. Feedback indicated that pressure was needed to ensure the FBU and LGA would negotiate an initial agreement in a timely manner. Subsequent additions were slow, which often meant that by the time an agreement was reached, partner agencies had found alternative solutions, or the support was out-of-date for the situation.

One factor noted as contributing to this delay was the difference in decision-making processes between the NFCC, LGA and FBU. Whereas key representatives for the NFCC and LGA are endowed with the autonomy to make decisions on behalf of their organisation, a committee makes FBU decisions and the time taken to do this is not well suited to the fast paced, dynamic nature of a pandemic.

Stakeholders also noted regional differences in how wedded fire and rescue services were to the national Tripartite Agreement. Some did not need it due to having well-developed relationships with partner agencies, and others used it as a guide but formed their own agreements with LRFs. Some regions with strong FBU representation passed many decisions up to the Tripartite Group to be negotiated due to concerns that FBU members would be instructed not to provide support if it was not in the Tripartite Agreement.

AACE, union and NFCC feedback noted that a greater range of support was provided in regions less wedded to the Tripartite Agreement, where there was greater willingness to make decisions at a local level in response to LRF requests.

Feedback from the NFCC, Home Office, AACE and unions also indicated that the Tripartite Agreement lacked flexibility, with FBU and LGA wanting to negotiate agreements at a national level creating barriers for tailoring support to the needs of the region.

LGA representatives felt it had been more efficient to negotiate at a national level during the initial outbreak rather than negotiating the same agreements for each individual region, but that, moving forward, greater flexibility would be beneficial. They also felt that having a central clearing house for LRF requests would have assisted in prioritising which activities needed to be negotiated quickly.

Additionally, unions noted frustrations caused by lack of consultation in the development of the Tripartite Agreement, with only the FBU being consulted. They were only made aware of the agreement through media coverage once it had been released, which prevented them from answering their members' queries.

The biggest issue was that large numbers of firefighters and Green book staff were affected by an agreement they had no representation in developing, as the views of one union do not necessarily reflect the views of all. Unions commented that their members felt frustrated because they wanted to provide support to partner agencies but were prevented from doing so due to the lack of flexibility in the Tripartite Agreement and length of time it took for amendments to be agreed.

Overall, stakeholder feedback indicates that now agreements, training and risk assessments are in place to cover a range of key activities, it should be quicker to step up this support in future. It will be all the more important to have a flexible approach moving forward to allow a greater degree of negotiation at local levels in response to local needs. This is because future infection peaks may occur at different times across regions, requiring different regional responses. In addition, as the existing agreement covers such a wide range of activities, any future requests are likely to be bespoke to that region, which would make less sense to negotiate nationally.

## 17. Key learning

During the interviews, CFOs were asked to describe key learning from responding to the pandemic that they would like to share with the NFCC. Some of this reinforces what has already been discussed above, and some is new.

No.	Key learning	CFO	Stakeholder
Planning and the Local Resilience Forum			
1	Ongoing maintenance and development of relationships with partners in the Local Resilience Forum is critical to ensure effective working during times of crisis.	✓	✓
2	The relationship between the LRF and the Government through the Government Liaison Officer system does not work consistently for all; it needs re-examining to ensure it is supportive of work being carried out at a local level.	✓	
3	Planning for pandemics focused too much on flu, which meant scenarios were not appropriate for COVID-19; need to revisit and reconsider planning assumptions.	✓	
4	To build in recovery planning at the start of the pandemic in order to emerge a better organisation as a result.	✓	
5	Encourage an organisational culture of business continuity planning, increasing emphasis on it and developing resilience for specialist staff in those roles.	✓	
6	The pandemic provides an opportunity for the fire and rescue service to demonstrate its capabilities in emergency planning and its contribution to the LRF.	✓	✓
7	Local lockdowns will need a different approach, need to edit existing arrangements and guidance based on experience of those affected in the early months.	✓	✓
8	Build on relationships with ambulance services in order to identify what forms of mutual support can become the norm.	✓	✓
9	Consider the role of the fire and rescue service in LRFs and whether they could position themselves for supporting longer run events like floods in terms of logistics cell for LRFs.		✓

No.	Key learning	CFO	Stakeholder
Leadership			
1	Existing leadership arrangements may not work during the pandemic and CFOs should not be afraid to change them; need to have right levels of organisational resilience to prevent burn out of principal officers.	✓	
2	Reinforced the need to set the tone from the top and to have visible leadership to all work groups using a wide range of channels.	✓	
3	Focus on looking after people and to remember the variable emotional resilience of staff who may not all react in the same way and to be aware of organisational fatigue.	✓	✓
4	Trust staff by providing a set of guiding principles of how to work during time of pandemic rather than be prescriptive and top down.	✓	
5	Review the organisational changes made during the pandemic and consider whether a return to normal is what is required.	✓	✓
6	Treat all staff as key workers during the pandemic to allow access to schooling demonstrates the value of all staff regardless of work group.	✓	
7	Ensure all staff are recognised for the contributions they make, both to the pandemic response and day-to-day functions.		✓

No.	Key learning	CFO	Stakeholder
Tripartite Agreement			
1	The willingness of staff from all work groups to volunteer to help in whatever way they could was impressive and demonstrates the commitment of fire and rescue service staff to helping their communities.	✓	✓
2	Plan the additional activities that fire and rescue services may be requested to complete in advance as part of inter-agency emergency planning; acknowledge that in future crises, absence rates might not allow for those additional activities to be completed.	✓	
3	Localised lockdowns provide an opportunity for CFOs to make decisions and negotiate locally based on local circumstances. Focus on ensuring greater flexibility moving forward so that decisions can be made at local levels to offer support to LRFs in a timely manner in line with demands.	✓	✓
4	If there is to be a national agreement about additional activities during a pandemic or other nationally significant event, it should be based on a set of principles or strategic objectives so that fire and rescue services can be more agile in their response.	✓	✓
5	The quality of the relationships between senior fire officers and local trade union representatives made a significant difference to how they responded to the pandemic. A more local approach can allow for a more proportional approach to negotiation and consultation with all recognised trade unions.	✓	✓
6	Fire and rescue services should respond to appropriate requests for support from other agencies without overplaying what they can provide or their value in a crisis.	✓	
7	There is potential for the role of the firefighter to be expanded to do more to support partner agencies and communities.	✓	✓
8	Future agreements regarding additional activities during a pandemic or other nationally significant event should be	✓	✓

	completed in consultation with all unions so that all staff have representation.		
10	The NFCC would have benefitted from contacting National Employers prior to FBU in order to understand the context of how systems work and improve negotiations regarding the Tripartite Agreement.		✓
11	Focus on investing in relationships between the NFCC and FBU to build trust to assist with better working relationships.		✓

No.	Key learning	CFO	Stakeholder
Operations			
1	Locking down fire stations early works and contributes considerably to the low level of sickness and absence from operational work force.	✓	
2	On-call staff demonstrated the pride they have in their local community and this should be built on and sustained long term to retain and develop this part of the operational work force.	✓	✓
3	Discussions with government regarding employment status of on-call firefighters resolved a major issue early on in the pandemic and demonstrated the need to take a national approach to solve a problem for all.	✓	✓
4	Need to ensure resilience of control rooms and reconsidering delivery models for the 999 service when faced with long term pandemic conditions.	✓	
5	Importance of being clear about the status of front-line staff in terms of the testing regime so that operational response can be maintained.	✓	
6	Look at protection for fleet technicians, face coverings, number of technicians working together, and ability to maintain social distancing as much as possible.		✓

No.	Key learning	CFO	Stakeholder
Fire protection			
1	Ceasing or significantly reducing fire protection activity will leave a long-term legacy of catch up with unknown impacts.	✓	✓
2	Fire and rescue services will have to reset their relationship with those responsible for fire safety in non-domestic premises to ensure that the move to COVID-safe doesn't increase fire risk.	✓	

No.	Key learning	CFO	Stakeholder
Fire prevention			
1	Working with partners to locate vulnerable people in communities during the pandemic has created opportunities to share data and improve understanding of who is at risk at a local level; this needs to be developed longer term.	✓	
2	Virtual models of fire prevention where triage by phone or online is the first interaction offers a new model for fire and rescue services to consider as entering peoples' homes is unlikely to be possible for a long time.	✓	✓
3	Focus more on the preventative work long-term outside of the pandemic because this works to reduce incidents.		✓

No.	Key learning	CFO	Stakeholder
Working from home			
1	Staff responded well to working from home and productivity levels increased; provides evidence of the potential to create hybrid models of working in the future.	✓	✓
2	Extensive use of virtual working has impacts on staff wellbeing; need to understand how best to manage this and make changes if it is to be maintained for an extended period.	✓	
3	Digital transformation was accelerated as a result of lockdown and demonstrated that the ICT infrastructure could support extensive working from home despite initial teething problems in some services.	✓	
5	Focus on making sure the right equipment is in place for staff working from home.		✓

No.	Key learning	CFO	Stakeholder
Communications			
1	All members of the SCG need pre-briefing before daily government public briefings to allow time for changes to be implemented locally.	✓	
2	A one size fits all communication model does not work. Need to communicate with staff using a range of channels to accommodate different working patterns and learning styles.	✓	
3	Empathy is vital when communicating in crisis; understanding the anxiety of staff and providing reassurance ensures staff are well informed and able to work effectively when geographically dispersed.	✓	✓
4	Communicating with staff works both ways: staff need to understand the rationale for decisions, and they need a mechanism through which to share feedback and respond in real time where possible.	✓	✓



No.	Key learning	CFO	Stakeholder
Data			
1	Fire and rescue services need to know at the start of a major incident what data is required from them and what will be done with it.	✓	
2	Having the means to share data with partners in a legally compliant way is hard during times of crisis; planning for data sharing should be built-in to major incident planning.	✓	
3	Better data capture is needed to demonstrate the effort that fire and rescue services invested in wider activities supporting partner agencies.	✓	✓

No.	Key learning	CFO	Stakeholder
Role of the NFCC			
1	The creation of a specific committee to manage the response to the COVID-19 pandemic worked well and the model should be used again, with some modifications, in the future.	✓	
2	Regular communication with CFOs provides opportunity for all to hear from others, share experience and influence approach at an NFCC level; providing a means to record key points via channels like Workplace would improve this approach.	✓	
3	Demonstrated the benefit of having a professional body able to provide a consistent, national view to partners.	✓	
4	Governance models affect the way that fire and rescue services operate and respond; a one-size-fits-all approach to dealing with CFOs may not always be effective.	✓	

No.	Key learning	CFO	Stakeholder
Other			
1	Need to determine the best way to capture all the learning from the pandemic when so many organisations will be asking for it; how best to combine that with learning from other agencies to get a full picture.	✓	
2	To use the pandemic as an opportunity to have a national conversation about how the fire and rescue service could evolve in the future.	✓	✓
3	Fire and rescue service's relationship with government departments beyond the Home Office is weak; need to find a better way of communicating either directly or via the LRF during time of crisis.	✓	✓
4	The public has seen a different perspective of the fire and rescue service as staff have taken on different roles in the community; this offers an opportunity to demonstrate the diversity of the role and encourage recruitment from wider sections of the community.	✓	
5	Thinking about how fire and rescue service estate is used and whether there are potential efficiencies to be gained from new ways of working.	✓	
6	Focus on having a stronger grip on PPE stock and usage and reporting accurate details into national systems so that support for sourcing stock can be improved.		✓
7	Not enough is known about what strategies allowed some regions to maintain better access to PPE and provide quicker support to LRFs.		✓

## 18. Recommendations

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*”<sup>3</sup>.
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.
5. Given the extensive work undertaken by fire and rescue services in support of ambulance trusts, underpinned by the Consensus Statement<sup>4</sup>, 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.

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<sup>3</sup> LGA. (2018). An inclusive fire service – recruitment and inclusion. Retrieved from <https://www.local.gov.uk/inclusive-fire-service-recruitment-and-inclusion>

<sup>4</sup> Consensus Statement on joint working during the COVID-19 pandemic between NFCC and AACE. <http://www.nationafirechiefs.org.uk/COVID-19>

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.

## 19. Appendix A – Fire and rescue service interviewees

Fire and rescue service	Name	Role	Date interviewed
Avon	Mick Crennell	CFO	30 July 2020
Bedfordshire	Paul Fuller	CFO	11 August 2020
Buckinghamshire	Jason Thelwell	CFO	29 July 2020
Cambridgeshire	Chris Strickland	CFO	27 July 2020
Cheshire	Mark Cashin	CFO	25 August 2020
Cleveland	Ian Hayton	CFO	24 August 2020
Cornwall	Mark Hewitt	CFO	11 August 2020
County Durham & Darlington	Stuart Errington	CFO	27 August 2020
Cumbria	John Beard	DCFO	6 August 2020
Derbyshire	Gavin Tomlinson	CFO	10 August 2020
Devon and Somerset	Lee Howell	CFO	12 August 2020
Dorset and Wiltshire	Ben Ansell	CFO	20 August 2020
East Sussex	Dawn Whittaker	CFO	30 July 2020
Essex	Jo Turton	Chief Exec	7 August 2020
Gloucestershire	Wayne Bowcock	CFO	30 July 2020
Hampshire	Neil Odin	CFO	7 August 2020
Hereford and Worcester	Nathan Travis	CFO	17 August 2020
Hertfordshire	Darryl Keen	CFO	27 August 2020
Humberside	Chris Blacksell	CFO	7 August 2020
Isle of Wight	Neil Odin	CFO	7 August 2020
Isles of Scilly	Mark Hewitt	CFO	11 August 2020
Kent	Ann Millington	Chief Exec	6 August 2020
Lancashire	Justin Johnston	CFO	29 July 2020
Leicestershire	Rick Taylor	CFO	28 August 2020
Lincolnshire	Les Britzman	CFO	25 August 2020
London	Andy Roe	CFO	7 September 2020
Manchester	Jim Wallace	CFO	UNAVAILABLE
Merseyside	Phil Garrigan	CFO	10 August 2020
Mid and West Wales	Chris Davies	CFO	4 September 2020
Norfolk	Stuart Ruff	CFO	24 August 2020

<b>Fire and rescue service</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Date interviewed</b>
North Wales	Richard Fairhead	ACFO	18 August 2020
North Yorkshire	Andrew Brodie	CFO	10 August 2020
Northamptonshire	Darren Dovey	CFO	2 September 2020
Northern Ireland	Michael Graham	CFO	17 August 2020
Northumberland	Paul Hedley	CFO	18 August 2020
Nottinghamshire	John Buckley	CFO	6 August 2020
Oxfordshire	Rob MacDougall	CFO	18 August 2020
Royal Berkshire	Trevor Ferguson	CFO	29 July 2020
Scotland	Martin Blunden	CFO	DECLINED
Shropshire	Rod Hammerton	CFO	7 August 2020
South Wales	Huw Jakeway	CFO	19 August 2020
South Yorkshire	Alex Johnson	CFO	24 August 2020
Staffordshire	Becci Bryant	CFO	12 August 2020
Suffolk	Mark Hardingham	CFO	12 August 2020
Surrey	Steve Owen-Hughes	CFO	UNAVAILABLE
Tyne and Wear	Chris Lowther	CFO	12 August 2020
Warwickshire	Kieran Amos	CFO	6 August 2020
West Midlands	Phil Loach	CFO	19 August 2020
West Sussex	Sabrina Cohen Hatton	CFO	3 September 2020
West Yorkshire	John Roberts	CFO	21 August 2020

## 20. Appendix B – Stakeholder interviewees

<b>Stakeholder organisation</b>	<b>No. interviewed</b>	<b>Date interviewed</b>
AACE	2	2 September
Fire Brigades Union	0	-
Fire Officers Association	1	19 August
Fire and Rescue Services Association	1	25 August
Home Office	2	25 August
Local Government Association	2	26/28 August
NFCC	1	27 August
UNISON	1	26 August

## 21. Glossary of terms

### Tripartite Agreement

In response to the developing COVID-19 crisis, the Tripartite Group was formed out of initial discussions between the FBU and the NFCC, which were broadened to include the National Employers. The Tripartite Agreement that followed was signed on 26 March 2020. The agreement carried three already agreed additional activities, which by 21 May had grown to fourteen in all, each announced through Tripartite Statements made by the Group.

### Local Resilience Forum

Local resilience forums (LRFs) are multi-agency partnerships made up of representatives from local public services, including the emergency services, local authorities, the NHS, the Environment Agency and others. These agencies are known as Category 1 Responders, as defined by the Civil Contingencies Act.

### Strategic Co-ordinating Group

The LRF is required to establish and test its collective arrangements to form a Strategic Co-ordinating Group (SCG) at the time of an emergency. The purpose of an SCG is to liaise with other tiers of government during an emergency and to lead the response and recovery activities.

### **Tactical Co-ordinating Group**

Operating below the SCG are two levels of multi-agency co-ordination: Tactical and Operational Co-ordinating groups. The Tactical Co-ordinating Group informs and supports the strategic decision-making process.

### **On-call firefighters**

Most fire and rescue services have a combination of wholetime and on-call firefighters who work part time in addition to their main employment. The balance of the two work groups varies, but as a general rule, the more rural the service, the more on-call firefighters are employed. On-call firefighters have 'day jobs' but are available for specified periods of time to respond to incidents from a hyper local area associated with individual fire stations.

### Green book

Local government terms and conditions is known as the Green book. It is the national agreement on pay and conditions for local government services.

### NFCC Strategic Intentions

A set of principles underpinning the approach taken by fire and rescue services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### National Co-ordination and Advisory Framework (NCAF)

The national co-ordination and advisory framework (NCAF) provides robust, flexible response arrangements to emergencies that can be adapted to the type and size of an event.