

Paul Hedley
Chief Fire Officer
Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service

Councillor Colin Horncastle
Chair of Fire Authority

22 April 2022

Dear Paul,

NORTHUMBERLAND FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE REVISIT

In June and July 2021, we inspected Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service. During our inspection, we identified the following cause of concern which we issued in September 2021:

“The management of dual contracts for staff working on-call and wholetime in the service must be improved.”

2. As a result, we made the following recommendations:

“By 31 March 2022, the service should:

- review its arrangements for managing the working time of staff who are both on-call and wholetime in Northumberland FRS;
- ensure the arrangements for staff working on dual contracts meet statutory requirements for health, safety, welfare and wellbeing; and
- ensure that staff take appropriate breaks between on-call and wholetime commitments for personal welfare and appliance availability.”

3. On 10 January 2022, you provided us with an update and action plan that set out how you would address the above cause of concern and our accompanying recommendations. We reviewed your plan, as well as your risk and equality impact assessments.

4. On 10 March 2022, we carried out a revisit to review progress. We interviewed managers, including you as chief fire officer, who were involved in implementing the new monitoring procedures. We also interviewed managers and control room staff who are responsible

for monitoring working hours for those members of staff on dual contracts. We concluded our revisit by giving you our initial findings. This letter provides an update in that respect.

Governance

5. We found that the service has appropriate and robust governance arrangements in place to monitor progress made against its action plan. The service's strategic performance board, which is chaired by the deputy chief fire officer, closely monitors such progress. For example, the service scrutinises on both a monthly and quarterly basis the measures it has put in place to safeguard the welfare and wellbeing of its staff on dual contracts.

6. Northumberland County Council also monitors progress against the cause of concern through its assurance and challenge panel. This panel includes the deputy chief executive of the county council, the chair and deputy-chair of the fire authority, and the executive director for business and innovation. This group collectively holds the chief fire officer to account for progress made against the cause of concern and the other areas we identified for improvement.

7. The service has scheduled a formal review of the new policy for staff on dual contracts, which will be held in six months' time.

Action plan

8. On 10 January 2022, we received the service's action plan for addressing the cause of concern. The plan includes details about the cause of concern, the actions being taken to resolve it, deadlines for such actions to be achieved, and who would be responsible for each action.

Progress made against the cause of concern

Management of dual contracts

9. We were pleased to see that the service has revised its policy for managing staff on dual contracts. The new policy specifies how managers should ensure that staff on dual contracts do not work excessive hours and that sufficient breaks are taken in between shifts.

10. The service's new policy includes risk and equality impact assessments. The risk assessment details how the service meets its statutory requirements for health, safety and welfare.

11. The policy also includes the monitoring of incidents taking place between 00.00 and 06.00 to identify which staff on dual contracts are being sent to incidents. The service now provides clear instructions to make sure that all staff on dual contracts take appropriate breaks between their respective contracts.

12. These monitoring arrangements do, however, rely on control room staff having the capacity to identify the staff that are on duty and are on a dual contract. This is a problem the service is aware of and is addressed in the new policy.

13. During the inspection, we found that the service had clearly communicated to all staff on dual contracts how they should manage their working hours. Managers with responsibility for staff on dual contracts have also received guidance on how to apply the new policy.

Conclusion

14. The revisit team were pleased to see that Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service has improved how it manages dual contracts for its staff. The robust plans that the service now has in place in response to this cause of concern reflect its determination and commitment to make the improvements that are needed.

15. The service now has in place an improved process for managing all staff on dual contracts. The process takes into account the statutory requirements for these members of staff, as well as their welfare and wellbeing.

16. We recognise that the service has carried out considerable work to support these improvements. As a result, we now consider this cause of concern to be complete. We will, however, continue to pay close attention to this area when we next inspect the service in Round 3.

17. This letter will be published on our website.

Yours sincerely,



HMCI Andy Cooke QPM DL

HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary

HM Chief Inspector of Fire and Rescue Services