



## COMBINED FIRE AUTHORITY

24 JULY 2020

### THE SERVICE'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

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#### REPORT OF CHIEF FIRE OFFICER

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##### PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1. To inform members of the activity the Service have been undertaking during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

##### BACKGROUND

2. On 11 March 2020 the World Health Organisation declared the Covid-19 Outbreak to be a pandemic and on 23 March 2020 the UK entered a period of lockdown. As with all organisations, Covid-19 has had a significant impact on County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service (CDDFRS). This paper outlines the work that has been undertaken by the Service throughout the period of the pandemic.
3. As part of business continuity planning CDDFRS had an existing Pandemic Influenza Business Continuity Plan and through the Local Resilience Forum (LRF) formed part of the North East Pandemic Influenza Framework. These plans formed the basis of the specific plans and actions implemented during Covid-19.

##### COMMAND AND CONTROL ARRANGEMENTS

4. The Pandemic Influenza Business Continuity Plan outlines that once a pandemic has been declared that the Service will establish a Strategic Pandemic Team (SPT) to oversee the strategic activity that will be required during the pandemic. The SPT was formed from members of the Service Leadership Team and was initially meeting on a daily basis. The SPT developed a set of strategic operating principles to help guide decision making at strategic and tactical level. A copy of the strategic intentions is attached as Appendix A.
5. The SPT also appointed the Pandemic Impact Management Group (PIMG) to oversee the tactical delivery of the business continuity plan and associated actions. The PIMG was formed from members of the Service Management Team and again met daily during the early stages of the response.
6. In order to give early consideration to the longer-term impacts of the pandemic on the Service a Recovery Group (RG) was also established in April 2020. At the end of June, the SPT and PIMG were stood down but it is envisaged that the RG will sit for the duration of the pandemic.

## PROTECTING STAFF FROM THE VIRUS

7. The Service have introduced a range of measures to try and protect staff, as far as possible, from contracting the virus. When introducing these measures, the Service took account of guidance from:
  - Government Departments,
  - Public Health England (PHE),
  - NHS England,
  - The National Fire Chiefs Council,
  - The LRF.
8. The Service has taken this guidance and developed a range of internal guidance for staff, supported by relevant risk assessments, training documents and interim procedures.
9. Some of the measures introduced include:
  - Initially limiting frontline activity to emergency response and risk critical prevention and protection work,
  - Encouraging as many staff as possible to work from home,
  - Developing Covid-19 safe working environments at all locations,
  - Limiting the movement between operational work environments,
  - Introducing strict social distancing rules in the workplace,
  - Implementing appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) where social distancing measures cannot be maintained,
  - Introducing strict hygiene measures and improved cleaning regimes,
  - Developing robust testing protocols for any staff or people in their households that have symptoms,
  - Having supportive arrangements in place for staff who are shielded or have people in their households who are shielded,
  - Working with our Occupational Health providers to deliver a package of welfare support measures for all staff.
10. Following guidance from the NFCC the Service took the decision to limit the risk of exposing operational crews to the virus by restricting non-operational and non-risk critical activity in the early stages of the pandemic.
11. The Service has invested heavily in ICT over the last few years and this undoubtedly supported the ability of staff to work from home and still deliver work effectively. Some additional licences and hardware have been purchased to support this migration to home working but the implementation of technology such as Microsoft Office 365 to all users eased this process.
12. The Assets and Assurance Team worked tirelessly to ensure all the new processes were effectively risk assessed and that all physical locations could adopt safe working practices where working from home was not possible. Additional equipment and PPE were procured so that it was readily available to any staff that needed it.
13. New guidance was received in June 2020 in relation to the government's Test and Trace System that potentially could have had a significant impact on absence levels of operational staff. The guidance specified the need to self-isolate for 14 days if in close contact with a person who tested positive for Covid-19. The guidance indicated that staff on a fire appliance for more than 15 minutes would all need to self-isolate if one member

of staff tested positive. In order to reduce this risk, the Service have agreed an alternative staffing model with the Fire Brigades Union for the duration of the crisis. This model ensures no more than four firefighters are on an appliance at any time however additional resources are available from staff crewing Targeted Response Vehicles at strategic locations across the Service area.

14. Despite some initial issues with the national testing regime the Service developed a robust approach to testing staff. In order to ensure that all staff could be tested quickly and that the results were as accurate as possible a service level agreement was signed with the NHS Foundation Trust. This enabled staff to be tested at a local hospital rather than go through the normal protocol that was put in place for the general public.

## **ENSURING THE AUTHORITY CONTINUED TO MEET ITS STATUTORY RESPONSIBILITIES**

15. In the early stages of the virus the Reasonable Worst Case Scenario (RWCS) planning assumptions from government predicted that staff absence levels from the virus could be as high as 20% with more staff being required to be at home for childcare reasons if schools were closed. If this turned out to be the case, there was the potential for a significant impact on frontline resources.
16. From an operational response perspective, a decision was therefore taken to increase the availability of station-based staff by introducing the following measures:
  - Introduce three inter service transferees in March,
  - Post the apprentices from Cohort 2 to specific wholetime watches in April,
  - Offer eight On-call staff who had passed the recent wholetime recruitment process a wholetime contact,
  - Continue with Trainee Course 170 through introducing social distancing and amending working practices at the Training Centre,
  - Bring forward the rotation of Cohort 3 apprentices to wholetime stations to June,
  - Train two corporate staff as Control Operators,
  - Re-training of two retired Control staff to provide additional resilience.
17. Taking these decisions early in the pandemic has ensured that staffing levels have remained high and the longer-term risks around the retirement profile following the expected changes to the firefighters' pension schemes have been mitigated. We have therefore not seen a reduction in wholetime staffing throughout the crisis.
18. In order to help mitigate the risk of transmission between staff and students at the Training Centre during any risk-critical training, the Service introduced a Temperature Monitoring Camera System. The system accurately measures the temperature of anyone entering the Training Centre and anyone displaying a temperature, which is a key symptom of Covid-19, has been stopped from entering the premises and asked to self-isolate until a test can be conducted. The Training Team have also looked at innovative ways of delivering training and maintaining staff competence without the need for people to attend the Centre as often.
19. From an On-call perspective we have seen excellent appliance availability due to the increased availability of a number of our firefighters who were either furloughed or working from home from their primary employment. As the country returns to some form of normality we are looking at ways of protecting the availability of On-call appliances.
20. From a Business Fire Safety (protection) perspective the Service (following NFCC) guidelines limited the number of fire safety audits undertaken in the early stages of the

pandemic. The Service, have however, introduced desktop fire safety audits to support local businesses who were working throughout the pandemic or who were looking to re-commence activity as lockdown has been eased. On a risk-based approach the recipients of these desktop audits have predominantly been schools, care homes and hot-food takeaways. The Service also has been collaborating with our partners across the North East region to provide advice, support, and engagement to businesses.

21. From a prevention perspective the Service again followed NFCC guidance and limited the exposure that frontline crews had with people in their homes. The Community Risk Officers (CROs) have continued to offer Safe and Wellbeing Visits to vulnerable people on a risk-based approach. Telephone Safe and Wellbeing visits have been developed and rolled out for lower risk households and the Service have continued to provide free smoke alarms to people who need them by posting them out directly to the public where appropriate. Operational crews and CROs, in appropriate PPE and following safe systems of work have continued to fit smoke alarms where posting them out was not deemed appropriate.

## **OPERATIONAL ACTIVITY DURING THE CRISIS**

22. Overall, the Service have experienced a reduction in operational activity during the Covid-19 crisis. In some respects that is understandable, especially during lockdown however there had been concerns that accidental dwelling fires might increase if people were spending more time at home. This potential increase has not materialised, and overall accidental dwelling fires remain below the five-year average. The number of Road Traffic Collisions have also reduced significantly compared to the five-year average as less traffic was initially on the road network.
23. There has been an increase in false alarm calls, often linked to controlled burning. As more people were at home and Household Waste Recycling Centres were closed it appears that more people were burning rubbish and garden waste. As more people were likely to be at home in neighbouring properties then it is unsurprising that calls into the call room increased during that period. The Service worked closely with the two local authorities on this issue and agreed joint communication messages out to the public to limit the impact of these calls.
24. Deliberate fires have also been lower than the five-year average although road vehicles remain the most prominent of deliberate primary fires.
25. The charging regime for Unwanted Fire Signals (UwFS) continues to be effective with these incident types remaining low. There was a concern that if business premises were unoccupied this might increase the number of UwFS incidents received during the crisis.

## **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY UNDERTAKEN**

26. During the crisis the Service has been involved in a significant amount of additional activity to support our local communities and partner organisations. The Service has played a major role in the operation of the multi-agency response to the pandemic through the LRF. Service Headquarters (HQ) operated as Strategic Coordinating Centre for the duration of the response phase. The military planners that were assigned to the LRF and a number of police colleagues operated from HQ. The Chief Fire Officer (CFO) chairs the LRF and Co-Chaired the Regional Strategic Coordinating Group that was established across the three LRFs in the North East. The Assistant Chief Fire Officer chaired the Tactical Business Group and many other staff played key roles in supporting the various LRF tactical cells that were established to deal with the situation in County Durham and Darlington.

27. Staff from across the Service also volunteered to undertake a number of duties to support our communities. These additional duties included:
- Delivering vital PPE to care homes and social care providers.
  - Delivering food parcels to vulnerable residents.
  - Undertaking training to drive ambulances to support North East Ambulance Service (NEAS).
28. Fortunately, NEAS did not need to call on the support of our staff to drive their ambulances as their own business continuity plans coped well in terms of staffing. There was over 100 volunteers to undertake this work and our staff remain committed to providing this support should it be required in the future.
29. The Service also provided significant support to the NFCC throughout the crisis. The CFO was asked to sit on the NFCC's Gold Group which oversaw the response to the crisis at a national level, with responsibility for Resources and Resilience. Staff from the Assets and Assurance Team supported the CFO and provided a number of key guidance documents and risk assessments that have been implemented as national guidance during the crisis.

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

30. The Home Office have provided FRSs with additional funding to ease the financial impact of Covid-19. In March the Service were notified that we would receive an additional grant of £125,448 and this was followed up with £473,336 at the end of April 2020. In total therefore we have received an additional £598,784. Whilst this additional funding is welcome expenditure has increased during the crisis.
31. The table below shows the predicted additional expenditure and lost income incurred by the Service up to 30 September 2020 as a result of Covid-19:
32. Potentially the Service could be facing a shortfall between the additional funding received by the Home Office and the additional costs incurred. As sickness levels remain lower than anticipated the predicted costs of OCCs may be lower. If additional staff retire compared to the retirement profile this will also reduce any deficit. The Authority also has a Resilience Reserve that can be utilised to cover any shortfall incurred should it be necessary.
33. Funding remains a concern for the Authority as there is still significant uncertainty in relation to the assumptions contained within the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP). This uncertainty relates to: staff pay awards; levels of government grant and the cost of employer pension contributions for firefighter pension schemes. There is also an emerging risk in relation to the collection of business rates and council tax as a result of the Covid-19 crisis which could potentially result in a significant shortfall in funding. It is therefore vital that expenditure continues to be tightly controlled and that our plans remain flexible.

<b>Expenditure</b>	<b>Cost (£)</b>
<b>Staffing</b>	
Fast track Apprentices – Cohort 2	44,000
Fast track Apprentices – Cohort 3	39,000
On-call to Wholetime Transfers	173,000
Additional Operational Cover Contracts (OCCs)	150,000
<b>Total Additional Staffing Costs</b>	<b>406,000</b>
<b>Other Costs</b>	
Additional PPE	148,000
ICT Infrastructure/Licences	26,000
Increased Cleaning Costs	13,000
<b>Total Additional Other Costs</b>	<b>187,000</b>
<b>Total Additional Expenditure</b>	<b>593,000</b>
<b>Lost Income from Trading Arm</b>	
Room Hire	12,000
Staff Recharge Costs	48,000
<b>Total Lost Income</b>	<b>60,000</b>
<b>Total cost of Covid-19</b>	<b>653,000</b>

## **ENGAGEMENT WITH STAFF**

34. It has been important to ensure that staff engagement has remained a key priority during the crisis, given the very different working arrangements that have needed to be implemented and the potential for increased concerns from staff both at work and in general. A significant amount of time and effort has therefore been dedicated to ensuring staff have all of the information that they require and putting in place any additional welfare support they may need.
35. From a communication perspective the Service have introduced a weekly Covid-19 Fireflash. The Fireflash is a short video message that is distributed to all staff, normally on a Thursday of each week. This has allowed timely and consistent messages to be distributed along with any key messages we needed to communicate. A regular Covid-19 newsletter has been circulated to staff which supported the Fireflash but contained more detailed information. The Service also established a dedicated SharePoint site which provides a one stop shop for staff to obtain detailed internal or external guidance documents.
36. As part of the transition to remote working and to help maintain social distancing measures the Service have fully utilised Microsoft Teams technology from the outset of the pandemic. The investment made in technology over the last few years positioned us well in this respect.
37. Engagement with the Trade Unions has also been extremely important during this crisis. The Service and the recognised unions have worked closely throughout this period. The NFCC, Fire Brigades Union (FBU) and the National Joint Council (NJC) agreed a range of Tripartite Agreements that have formed the basis of amending working practices for

firefighters at a local level. Underpinning the agreements are draft risk assessments, procedures and training plans that ensure robust local arrangements can be implemented.

38. Staff from all areas of the Service deserve great praise for their attitude and approach throughout the pandemic. Staff have been flexible, supportive and positive to all of the changes we have needed to introduce. We have actively sought ideas from staff about the approach we are taking or suggestions to do things differently. We have been overwhelmed with the response and staff suggestions have helped drive the different ways of working. It has been clear from the outset that the number one priority for staff has been protecting the public and continuing to offer a first-class emergency service to the people of County Durham and Darlington.

## **NEXT STEPS**

39. The Covid-19 crisis is likely to impact on the Service for some considerable time. The SPT and PIMG have been formally stood down but the Recovery Group will continue to look at the longer-term issues and any learning that can be gained from the changes we have implemented over the last few months. An interim debrief was undertaken in June 2020 and the Service is considering the findings of this process through the Recovery Group.
40. There will also be an opportunity to learn from the various debriefs that are taking place locally, regionally and nationally both in the sector and via the LRF. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabularies and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) are to formally request permission from the Home Office to undertake a thematic review of the sector's response to the crisis. This provides further opportunities to strengthen our business continuity plans, policies and procedures going forward.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

41. Members are requested to:
  - a) **note** the contents of the report and the Service's response to the Covid-19 crisis.

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