



Safest People, Safest Places

Combined Fire Authority

17 September 2021

UPDATE ON THE SERVICE'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Report of the Chief Fire Officer

Purpose of Report

1. To inform members of the activity the Service have been undertaking over the last 12 months of 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. Since then, restrictions have been developed by Government including two further lockdowns beginning on 5 November 2020 and 6 January 2021. As with all organisations, Covid-19 has had a significant impact on County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service (CDDFRS). The Service's initial response to the pandemic was presented to the Combined Fire Authority on 24 July 2020.
3. As previously detailed the Strategic Pandemic Team (SPT), formed from members of the Service Leadership Team, was set up to oversee the strategic activity during the pandemic. The SPT appointed the Pandemic Influenza Management Group (PIMG), formed from members of the Service Management Team, to oversee the tactical delivery during the pandemic.

Business Continuity Planning

4. 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.

5. To ensure the Service are better prepared for any future events the Service's actions to date have been debriefed and the business continuity plan has been reviewed in July 2020 and July 2021 to capture learning from the ebb and flow of the pandemic and restrictions.

Recovery Planning

6. The Service produced a comprehensive Recovery Strategy, with the aim to transition CDDFRS in to its 'new normal' following the COVID-19 pandemic. This focused on the following key areas:
 - **Welfare:** Provide appropriate welfare support to those staff and their families affected by the incident. Understand what medium and long term impacts the outbreak has had on health, safety and welfare provisions.
 - **The 'new normal':** Coordinate recovery of all sections as the COVID-19 response phase enters a steady state. Consider aspects of the organisation which have changed during the response period.
 - **Opportunities for Improvement:** Consider the opportunities available to CDDFRS to determine what 'the new normal' may look like, and to identify opportunities to influence change and improvement in the organisations culture.
 - **Finance:** Identify any financial impacts which may result in changing ways of working. Consider national and local economic predictions of the financial impacts of the outbreak.
 - **Communication:** Provide coordinated and consistent reassurance and information via our internal communications strategy and the Local Resilience Forum multiagency recovery communication strategy. Ensure that affected staff, communities, and businesses are fully informed in regard of the recovery process.
 - **Information:** Collate information on the response, impact of and recovery from the incident across CDDFRS to inform future planning, policies, and procedures.
 - **Debrief:** Implement a comprehensive coordinated post-incident debriefing and reporting process.
7. A Recovery Group was set up, working closely with SPT and PIMG to coordinate recovery activities. This Recovery Group adopted the best practice guidance from the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) Business Continuity Group, which included the 5S's model of recovery:
 - **Scan** Assess the current situation
 - **Stop** Consider what we used to do and have stopped doing. Do we need to reintroduce these? What else can we stop doing?
 - **Slow** What activities can we reduce or find alternative solutions to?
 - **Start** Consider the work we are carrying out which is not part of our statutory responsibilities. What new activities can we introduce?
 - **Speed up** What activities can we continue or increase?

8. Each section of the Service applied this 5S model to their activities. Some examples of the improvements identified are:
- Improvements to technology at all locations including fire stations to allow the improved use of virtual meetings. This was recently used for the cultural survey whereby Durham University Business School presented the results simultaneously to all locations and staff at home.
 - Development of a new Hybrid working policy to allow staff to continue to combine working from home and in the office.
 - As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic we introduced a flexible telephone triage system to identify the people most at risk of accidental dwelling fires and having reviewed the benefits, this learning will be applied moving forward and has been included in our Community Risk management Plan.

Protecting Staff from the Virus

9. A key goal during the pandemic has been to ensure appropriate policy, procedure and guidance to protect our staff from the pandemic. This has been regularly reviewed and updated as the pandemic situation and national and local guidance has changed.
10. During the pandemic the Service have conducted individual risk assessments for all staff. Any staff who were identified as being of higher risk from the virus were referred to our Occupational Health provider and received individual control measures.
11. The Service continued with its robust approach to testing staff utilising a service level agreement signed with the NHS Foundation Trust for PCR tests. Additionally, Lateral Flow Testing was introduced into the Service as soon as these were released to the Fire sector. This enabled staff to be regularly tested and provided extra protection against transmission of the virus in the workplace.
12. The Service have engaged with the local Vaccination Centres to allow staff early access to end of day vaccinations which may go to waste. We have also encouraged staff to access vaccinations through normal channels. Additionally, when the Government have introduced schemes for critical workers, such as Daily Contact Testing the Service have fully engaged with these schemes and provided detailed updates to staff.
13. The Service's has continued to invest in ICT to improve the virtual experience and ability of staff to work effectively from home. In addition, the Assets and Assurance Team have continued to work tirelessly with Finance to ensure cost effective purchase of certificated Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for all our staff.

Ensuring the Authority Continued to Meet its Statutory Responsibilities

14. A continued focus of SPT and PIMG was to ensure the Authority continued to meet its statutory responsibilities during the pandemic. Service plans were prepared to

meet the government's Reasonable Worst-Case Scenario (RWCS) planning assumptions of up to 20% staff absence.

15. Total staff absences never peaked as high as the RWCS, although sharp spikes have occurred when infection rates have been high in the region resulting in large numbers of notifications from Test and Trace. Service plans have remained robust and included a successful call-off, of our Business Continuity and Resilience arrangements in March 2021.
16. Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services conducted a Covid-19 thematic inspection of the Service during the pandemic and reported in January 2021:

"the service adapted and responded to the pandemic effectively. It continued to maintain its statutory functions, including responding to emergencies. It adapted its approach to prevention and protection activities to enhance social distancing and keep communities safe."

"The service has continued to provide its core statutory functions throughout the pandemic in line with advice from the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC). This means the service has continued to respond to calls from the public and attend emergencies. The service adapted its prevention work by introducing safe and well visits by telephone. It adapted its protection work by introducing desktop audits."

17. This independent report provides assurance of the successful approach to pre-planning by the Service and the actions of SPT and PIMG to ensure the Authority has met its statutory responsibilities during the pandemic.

Additional Activities

18. During the pandemic, CDDFRS was prepared to assist partner organisations in the fight against COVID-19. As previously highlighted during the first wave there was limited need from partners, with support only needed to support logistic arrangements for some of the Local Resilience Forum (LRF) cells.
19. From February 2021, there was an increased ask from partners for support. To support this work, staff were asked to volunteer to provide assistance. 174 staff have volunteered to assist with additional activities to support partners and communities in the fight against COVID-19.
20. As of 31 August 2021, CDDFRS staff have supported partners in the following areas:
 - Supported NHS Vaccination Centres with logistical support and Vaccinators to administer vaccinations;
 - CDDFRS staff have provided over 7,500 hours of support to the Vaccination Centres;
 - 25 staff have been trained as Vaccinators and have administered over 25,000 vaccinations;

- Supported Durham County Council to run six Community Testing Sites with our staff providing over 3,500 hours of leadership and support to the testing sites;
- Support Durham County Council with their local test and trace service visiting almost 300 households;
- 255 deliveries have been made to deliver essential items to vulnerable persons and the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to NHS and care facilities;
- Six staff have been trained to drive ambulances and support NEAS as a resilience arrangement, although fortunately this support was never needed.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

21. The Home Office have provided FRSs with additional funding to ease the financial impact of Covid-19. In March 2020 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. The Service also were successful in a bid to the Contingency Fund and received £476,854 and were then given a further £98,995 from the Contingency Fund Balance Share. In total therefore we have received an additional £1,174,633 to help support our response to Covid-19.
22. The additional funding has enabled the Service to increase frontline staffing and mitigate any potential threat of significant staffing shortages. The Service fast-tracked a number of the apprentice cohorts onto stations, introduced an additional on-call to wholtime transfer process and funded additional operational cover contracts (OCCs). The measures provided additional staff on a temporary basis and the staffing numbers have now returned to normal as people have retired or left the Service.
23. The additional funding has also facilitated the Service undertaking the significant additional activities listed above. The additional funding received from the Home Office will however be exhausted in October 2021 and therefore some of these activities will cease unless arrangements are agreed locally with partners for funding.

Engagement with Staff

24. An important element of the Service's approach during the pandemic has been continued staff engagement. A significant effort has been dedicated to ensure staff have the information they require and welfare support is in place.
25. Regular Fireflash communications have remained in place. These are short video messages that are distributed by email to all staff. This has continued to allow a timely and consistent message to be distributed along with any new key messages. The Service's dedicated SharePoint site is regularly updated and provides a one stop shop for staff to obtain detailed internal or external guidance documents.

26. Engagement with the Trade Unions has continued to be extremely important during this crisis and the Service and the recognised unions have met regularly and worked closely throughout this period.

27. 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 and have actively sought to continue to support a first-class emergency service to the people of County Durham and Darlington.

Recommendations

28. Members are requested to:

- a) **Note** the contents of the report and the Service's continued response to the Covid-19 crisis.

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