



NOTTINGHAMSHIRE
Fire & Rescue Service
Creating Safer Communities

Nottinghamshire and City of Nottingham
Fire and Rescue Authority
Policy and Strategy Committee

SERVICE RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK

Report of the Chief Fire Officer

Date: 01 May 2020

Purpose of Report:

To provide an update to Members on the Service's response to the Covid-19 situation.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that Members:

- Endorse the approach taken by the Chief Fire Officer in responding to the COVID-19 outbreak;
- Approve the short-term re-engagement of operational staff to be utilised as part of a blended approach to maintaining critical staffing levels.

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1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The potential for a flu-pandemic has been part of the Service's and Local Resilience Forum (LRF) business continuity plans for a number of years. The Service and partners are therefore well prepared for the eventualities that have emerged over the past few weeks. However, it cannot be underestimated how significant the impact has been on the Service, its partners and the communities it serves.
- 1.2 As the scale of impact of COVID-19 increased across Category One responders, the Nottinghamshire LRF, along with many others, declared a major incident and activated the systems and processes in place to support partners and the communities.
- 1.3 This report provides Members with an overview of the current operating environment and the broader impact on Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service.

2. REPORT

- 2.1 During the early part of the year, as the outbreak of COVID-19 in China was publicised, the Service undertook a review of its pandemic business continuity plan. This was replicated within the LRF as all organisations began to realise the potential for the spread of the disease to the UK.

WORKFORCE

- 2.2 This timely review enabled the Service to react very quickly when restrictions were introduced in March. Within a week, the majority of officers, support and day-duty staff were working from home, or provided the opportunity for social distancing within the workplace. This was largely due to the investment in the ICT infrastructure over the last few years resulting in the availability of remote working through Office 365, Skype and SharePoint etc.
- 2.3 All operational staff are considered 'key workers'. Furthermore, all other staff can be nominated as 'key workers' by the Chief Fire Officer dependant on their specific role. This has ensured staff are able to access child care during the school closures and remain at work where required. This will also enable staff and their family home members to access testing if required.
- 2.4 A small number of staff, or their close family members, are considered at high risk from the disease and require shielding. These individuals have been considered on a case by case basis by the Occupational Health Department and tailored solutions put in place to support them.
- 2.5 Recorded absence related to the disease peaked at around 9% in the early stages due to self and/or family isolation, with some of those members of staff still able to continue working from home. At the time of writing the report

(21 April 2020) related absence is 3% with only two members of staff reporting actual sickness from the virus.

- 2.6 There has not been the need to furlough any members of staff at this time, neither is the intention to do so unless circumstances change significantly.

SERVICE DELIVERY

- 2.7 Due to the restrictions in place, and in recognition that on-call firefighters' availability has increased, availability of operational assets has been significantly better than normal. This, coupled with the very low level of current absence being experienced, means the operational resilience of the Service is at a very high level.
- 2.8 Incident numbers are stable and there are no related incident types of any significance that are unduly impacting upon the Service.
- 2.9 In the context that national work within the NJC to enable firefighters to undertake broader activities was moving slowly, the Chief Fire Office made a personal plea to staff to step forward and engage in supporting their communities. This was a resounding success and has resulted in almost 100 individuals volunteering to undertake work in support of partners and has also encouraged crews across the county to reach out to communities and offer support in areas such as the delivery of food, medication and other essential items. The District Prevention Officers have adapted their normal ways of working to co-ordinate this work and capture the activities being undertaken for future reference.
- 2.10 The Prevention Team has amended the delivery of their activities to ensure that the Service continues to support those who are most vulnerable in the community. With the cessation of prevention activities by response crews, the Persons at Risk (PAR) Team have modified their normal working arrangements to triage all referrals from partner agencies, and the public, for safe and well visits. Over 700 referrals have still been received in the first three weeks of business continuity measures being adopted.
- 2.11 These referrals are assessed and those deemed to be high or very high risk are attended by members of the PAR Team, wearing appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE). Those which are assessed to be medium risk are contacted by telephone. These calls enable members of the PAR Team to speak with the individual about fire safety, offer support and also inform them that a full safe and well visit will be completed on return to normal activities. The PAR Team continue to respond to requests for deaf alarms, threats of arson and to referrals for young fire-setters.
- 2.12 The Protection Team has continued its statutory role of regulation, but has amended their ways of working in line with guidance from the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC). The Service has adopted remote-auditing where possible, to engage with those premises which are deemed to have the highest risk from fire, to ensure that businesses continue to operate in a safe and compliant manner. The team continues to respond to referrals relating to

fire safety concerns, complaints and building regulation submissions, including visits to businesses when required, utilising appropriate PPE and processes to minimise risk to personnel.

- 2.13 The team is also engaging with the remaining premises which are undergoing remediation for ACM cladding in Nottingham, ensuring that progress is maintained, in line with agreed remediation plans, to remove this risk.
- 2.14 The Service has used the opportunity of a reduced workload for its Fire Safety Inspectors (FSIs) to temporarily redirect further resources to the collaborative project with Nottingham City Council (NCC). Members will be aware of the joint approach with NCC that is addressing the risk from Multi-Occupancy Residential Buildings (MORBs) in the City where a FSI has been seconded for a period of two years to form part of a Joint Inspection Team. A further FSI has been seconded for an initial period of two months to the Team in order to maximise the opportunity of many MORBs being currently empty, or at limited capacity, due to the absence of the student population. This will enable the Team to make swift progress in inspecting these premises and ensuring that they are safe and compliant for when the occupants return.

PREPAREDNESS

- 2.15 When initial restrictions were put in place, training (drill) periods for on-call staff and other training was stopped. This is being restarted as each element of the training is risk assessed and mitigation put in place to support social distancing. This has resulted in the development of more on-line education and the prioritisation of training types.
- 2.16 Operational crews are also maintaining preparedness for high risk premises with appropriate familiarisation and training continuing. The levels of PPE and other supplies within the Service are also sufficient.

PARTNER ASSISTANCE

- 2.17 Through the LRF and local relationships, the Service is supporting a number of other organisations during the crisis with the provision of staff who have volunteered to undertake additional duties in support of communities.
- 2.18 East Midlands Ambulance Service (EMAS). 12 members of staff have been deployed from each fire service in the region to support the transport of acute patients between hospitals, and also support with the delivery of PPE across their stations. This may be expanded if demand escalates.
- 2.19 Nottinghamshire LRF. Staff have been trained to support the temporary mortuary being prepared should this be required, and preparatory work is being undertaken to support with the delivery of pharmacy items.
- 2.20 Bassetlaw General Hospital. The potential to provide face-fit testing for PPE is being explored.

LOCAL AND NATIONAL INTERACTION

- 2.21 Regular virtual meetings are taking place through the LRF at the strategic and tactical levels. These are attended by nominated strategic and middle managers to maintain consistency, and feed in to the twice weekly internal business continuity management (BCM) meetings.
- 2.22 The Chief Executive of the County Council hosts a weekly meeting for all Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Chief Officers to share knowledge, information and learning, and to maintain regular support and communication at the most senior level within the County.
- 2.23 The Chief Fire Officer hosts a weekly meeting involving all the regional Fire Chiefs and the Chief Executive of EMAS. This meeting ensures local consistency in approach, has enabled the development of the assistance to EMAS, creates the opportunity to share learning and provides a support mechanism which has been established over many years.
- 2.24 The Chief Fire Officer is also the national lead for Finance within the NFCC and is part of the Gold Group that has been established at the national level to work directly in support of the Home Office to deliver fire and rescue, and wider partner, statutory functions. This requires regular interaction on national issues and a weekly virtual meeting of the Gold Group regularly attended by Home Office Civil Servants and Ministers.

COMMUNICATION

- 2.25 Internal Communications. Significant work has been undertaken to ensure staff have been informed and supported through the changes required to adapt the Service to operate under the current restrictions.
- 2.26 Twice weekly briefing papers are provided to staff and a regular skype briefing is conducted by either the Chief or Deputy Chief Fire Officer to all staff, which sees around 200 participants tune in and raise concerns or ask questions. There is a dedicated page on the Intranet which provides one location for all information which staff can easily access.
- 2.27 There is also other communication taking place to ensure that staff remain socially connected whilst working from home and observing social distancing protocols. This has involved online fitness classes, meditation and mindfulness sessions, regular one to one contact by line managers, and where required, occupational health staff and the Peer Support Team.
- 2.28 The Chief Fire Officer and Chair wrote to staff to thank them for their efforts on behalf of the Fire Authority and citizens across the City and County. Members will also be aware that the Chief Fire Officer has provided regular informal briefings to Members of the Authority to keep them updated within this fast-moving environment.
- 2.29 External Communications. The establishment of the local and national interaction above ensures that formal communication is undertaken across all

partner agencies at the local, regional and national level. The Communications Manager is also engaged in the LRF communications cell for updates and co-ordination of messages with partners.

- 2.30 In terms of communication with the general public, the initial phase was focused on re-assuring communities that the Service is still there for them and that response to emergencies is operating normally. This has moved to focus on the work the Service is continuing to do in communities, and also supports the additional activity being undertaken through the delivery of essential items such as food and medication etc.
- 2.31 The Prevention and Protection Teams have embedded a member of each team in to the Corporate Communications team in order to ensure that communication with communities is as effective as possible at this time; engaging with local communities to offer support and safety advice for domestic and non-domestic premises.

RECOVERY AND RETURNING TO BUSINESS AS USUAL

- 2.32 Responding to the impact of the crisis is now embedded and strategic focus is moving to the recovery phase. This is part of the regular BCM meetings taking place, and a lead officer has been nominated to work specifically on this issue.
- 2.33 One area of particular concern is the ability to maintain the operational establishment in both wholetime and on-call areas, as staff continue to retire and leave the Service through other means. This is complicated by the need to ensure the Service continues its excellent work on positive action to drive the diversification of the workforce.
- 2.34 Work is being undertaken to identify how recruitment can continue, but this is likely to increase the lead-in time and has the potential to present problems long after the disease has been dealt with. One option that may assist in this area is the ability to re-engage staff who have previously retired from the service. This is currently outside the normal recruitment policy; however, the Chief Fire Officer is seeking the ability to use this option as part of a blended approach to provide short-term support to the Service. Other options will include additional working hours and contracts for on-call staff, overtime and employment of transferees.
- 2.35 The current level of operational resilience is high; however, it is likely that as normality returns, on-call availability will reduce, and there is the potential that wholetime operational assets may be removed from service until establishment levels recover. If required, this will be managed in-line with the degradation policy and local mitigation put in place to maintain appropriate operational response.
- 2.36 The Service was due to engage in an LGA Equalities Peer Assessment during the Summer, and an HMI inspection during November. Both of these have now been suspended and further information will be provided to Members when it is available.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The financial implications regarding the Service's response to COVID-19 are significant and are dealt with explicitly elsewhere on this agenda.

4. HUMAN RESOURCES AND LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT IMPLICATIONS

The human resources and learning and development implications are dealt with in the main body of the report.

5. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

An equality impact assessment has not been undertaken because this report is not associated with a policy, function or service.

6. CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

There are no crime and disorder implications arising from this report.

7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Where the Service is operating outside of its normal operational arena, it is doing so under Part 2, Section 11 of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 which provides 'power to respond to other eventualities'. Furthermore, all staff engaged in that work are doing so under the direction of the Chief Fire Officer and therefore have the full protection of the Fire Authority as they would in their normal duties

8. RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

The COVID-19 situation has created an environment of heightened risk. The steps taken by the Service to respond to and recover from those risks should mitigate any long term lasting implications.

9. COLLABORATION IMPLICATIONS

The collaboration implications are dealt with in the main body of the report.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Members:

- 10.1 Endorse the approach taken by the Chief Fire Officer in responding to the COVID-19 outbreak.

10.2 Approve the short-term re-engagement of operational staff to be utilised as part of a blended approach to maintaining critical staffing levels.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS FOR INSPECTION (OTHER THAN PUBLISHED DOCUMENTS)

None.

John Buckley
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