

Report of the Director of Service Support

HWFRS Response to the Covid 19 Pandemic 2020

Purpose of report

1. To provide Members with an overview of the Service's preparation, response and review of its business continuity arrangements during the Covid 19 pandemic, 2020.
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Recommendation

It is recommended that the content of this report be noted.

Introduction and Background

2. This report was previously received by the Policy and Resources Committee at their meeting on 16 September 2020 when it was agreed that the Fire Authority should also receive a copy.
3. The Service has an extensive range of business continuity and risk management plans to ensure the effective delivery of a Fire and Rescue Service under a variety of adverse circumstances, which includes how it would operate during a viral pandemic.
4. Prior to Covid 19 this plan was developed on assumptions relating to pandemic influenza (flu), and was based upon the response to the 2010 UK wide swine flu outbreak. With knowledge of a new emerging viral outbreak in China in December 2019 the Service, in conjunction with West Mercia Local Resilience Forum (LRF) and partners, began to review these plans, and the Service's Strategic Risk Register was updated accordingly; however these plans required some prompt and significant alterations as the true nature of the Covid 19 outbreak began to emerge.
5. The Covid related pre-planning was undertaken throughout February 2020, alongside a prolonged and severe flooding event. In late February the Strategic Coordinating Group (SCG), led by the LRF with a range of strategic multi-agency partners, had already been in operation due to the flood related activity. This flood related SCG was then combined with a Covid briefing at the same time. As the flooding related events began to subside the SCG continued as a Covid specific arrangement, and is still currently in operation.

How the Service Responded

6. The Service response to Covid 19 can be divided into two distinct areas:
 - i. The internal business continuity arrangements that were enacted to ensure a sufficient and robust Fire and Rescue Service continued to carry out response, protection and prevention activities throughout the pandemic.

- ii. The role of HWFRS within the LRF (and SCG), and how the Service played a key role in leading and supporting its partners and communities throughout the pandemic.

Internal Business Continuity

7. Using the pandemic flu plans as a starting point, all fire stations and departments undertook in-depth reviews based on the emerging planning assumption in the first few months of 2020, in order to prepare for the arrival of the Covid virus in the UK. This was supported by the Emergency Planning and Resilience Officer (EPRO) who was liaising with other agencies, and with support from the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC).
8. To support and implement these plans the Service established a Covid 19 Response Group chaired by the Director of Service Support and comprising of members of the Senior Management Board (SMB) and key Department Heads, as well as Health and Safety, Communications and Emergency Planning specialists. This group has held weekly meetings throughout the pandemic, continues to meet regularly, and will do so for the foreseeable future.
9. A number of other key early actions were taken to support the Service's resilience arrangements:
 - Establishment of a full time 24/7 Primary Crewing Hub (PCH) to monitor and report twice daily on all staff absences, alongside the HR Department. The PCH also arranged and managed operational staff movements to cover locations and maintained optimum availability of fire engines, and staffing in departments.
 - Developing a Priority Resilience Register for staff (predominantly On-Call staff) who were financially impacted by the Covid pandemic to receive priority when allocating resilience (overtime) duty shifts.
 - Protected pay for On-Call (Retained) staff.
 - Provision of extensive ICT arrangements for agile working.
 - Obtaining and issuing essential Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and cleaning agents, and the early procurement of additional stock.
 - Liaising with the wider Fire sector to identify best practice and interpret central Government guidance
 - Issuing key operational response guidance and adapting guidance as new information was released.
 - Reviewing risk assessments and developing appropriate new risk assessments, new H&S arrangements and reporting protocols.
 - Steadily reducing non-essential activities and identifying where high risk activities needed to continue.
 - Carrying out a full review to establish how to deliver essential risk critical operational training over a 3, 6 and 12 month period.
 - Reviewing and assessing how we could defer certain prevention and protection activities, but maintain services to those most at risk or vulnerable throughout the pandemic period.

- Liaising regularly with Representative Bodies to seek agreement and consensus regarding new critical Health and Safety practices and procedures.
 - Consolidating and centralising Covid related communications to staff.
 - Providing regular reassurance and support to all members of staff via a variety of communication channels
 - Creating an archive and central data point for all Covid related activity, guidance and documents to enable future scrutiny and review.
 - Extensive reporting to central Government on operational readiness and the impact of Covid on Service's ability to deliver core services
10. As the pandemic escalated in the UK there were two key areas of priority for the Service: firstly to ensure that all staff had adequate PPE and secondly to ensure staff had all appropriate guidance and information on how to respond and operate safely at work, and when interacting with the public operationally at incidents and for essential duties, such as prevention activities with vulnerable people.
 11. These priorities faced significant challenges throughout the pandemic due to the rapidly changing advice and guidance being issued nationally, and the inability to obtain all types of recommended PPE. Fortunately some of the firefighting PPE currently in use could be adapted to ensure that staff were not put at risk. The management of PPE, issuing new guidance and developing new working practices, alongside monitoring and managing staffing arrangements over a prolonged period, has required a significant sustained effort across the whole Service.
 12. Due to the broad skill set of operational firefighters and the high risk activities they undertake, the annual operational training programme is extensive and intensive. SMB recognised early on in the Covid pandemic that there was a need to fully review and risk assess how to ensure that firefighters remained competent over a 3-6 month period, when routine training activities could not be undertaken. Essential training was maintained with Covid related precautions in place, with a large proportion of routine training being deferred or undertaken locally, alongside new ways of training being developed including online and video training and assessments.
 13. SMB, the LRF, and the Covid 19 Response Group met weekly for a period of over four months, and will continue to meet regularly as long as is necessary. The Covid pandemic, however, has led to large parts of the Service working full time on Covid related matters for many months. Despite this, staff have worked tirelessly and flexibly to ensure the Service's other functions and duties continued to be managed and maintained in all areas.
 14. As a result of the significant internal planning detailed above, the Service has been able to maintain full operational response capability from all of its response locations across Herefordshire and Worcestershire as well as developing the new specialist Covid response capabilities required by LRF as a result of the pandemic.

Role of HWFRS within the Local Resilience Forum (LRF)

15. The LRF led SCG is a multi-agency meeting of strategic leaders to oversee the coordination of a response to any 'major emergency'. A major emergency is a

specific defined event which can be declared by any agency when normal arrangements may be overwhelmed and additional support is required. Both the flooding in February 2020 and the Covid pandemic were classified as major emergencies and warranted the full and sustained establishment of a SCG for the West Mercia area. Tactical Coordinating Groups (TCGs), that operate under the SCG, were established in Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Shropshire.

16. The Chair, and leadership of the SCG, is led through the Chief Constable, with support from both Chief Fire Officers in the West Mercia area. Unlike flooding, which is led by the blue light responders and Environment Agency, the response to Covid was a health led event; however leadership and management of the LRF and SCG remained with Chief Police Officer and was supported by the Chief Fire Officers throughout.
17. The SCG had two main functions during the Covid pandemic, firstly to ensure all agencies worked in coordination with each other and shared essential and important information on a range of issues - primarily how the pandemic was directly affecting the local communities and regular updates on how the NHS and Health agencies were coping with the unprecedented demand. Secondly, the SCG provided a forum where agencies could collaborate and work together to support each other, offer assistance and provide the optimum use of resources across the public and voluntary sector, and military specialists.
18. HWFRS became involved in several key areas of support for other agencies:
 - i. Receiving and distributing PPE to the NHS and Local Authorities, over both counties with around 146 pallets of equipment and over 880,000 individual items being received and delivered by HWFRS staff. This involved 30 members of HWFRS staff and vehicles over a four month period working closely with West Mercia Police, NHS and military colleagues.
 - ii. Preparation for the removal and transport of the deceased, due to the potential for normal arrangements to be overwhelmed. Whilst HWFRS staff did not need to activate this plan to any great extent, the arrangements and preparations for this took over 350 hours of HWFRS staff time.
 - iii. Similar to the example in (ii) above, extensive preparations were made for HWFRS staff to drive ambulances, again taking many hours of staff time, although were not required to be activated in the West Midlands area.
 - iv. Face mask fitting and training for NHS and care workers. It was identified that HWFRS was best placed to support Health colleagues in the testing and fitting of face masks so that they were using the new equipment correctly and were appropriately protected from the virus. HWFRS staff spent over 150 hours undertaking this activity, which resulted in staff from the Wye Valley NHS Trust receiving testing and training.
 - v. Supporting Police colleagues with Drone (UAV) support to ensure specific areas were not subject to large gatherings. This footage was used to support and promote positive behaviours by the public rather than any form of enforcement.

- vi. HWFRS staff also supported and provided expertise to the LRF, SCG and TCGs, including supporting Police colleagues in chairing and leading these arrangements, and providing dedicated loggists and admin support.
19. Whilst the support the Service has given the LRF has been extensive, it should also be noted that the cooperation and support of LRF partners, especially in providing up to date and accurate information on the spread and impact of the Covid virus, was essential to inform and support HWFRS throughout this period.

Recovery and Debrief

20. Recovery operations, or, in the case of the Covid virus, the restoration of a new normality, were activated within the Service at an early stage around May 2020, alongside a still very active response phase. The Service felt it was essential to begin looking at how and what would be required to move back towards a sense of normality and restore core activities. There was also a strong desire by SMB to capture and learn from the Covid pandemic experience and ensure that we adopted any lessons learnt and understood what worked well and what did not. This needed to happen to ensure the Service was ready for any potential re-emergence of the virus for 'second wave' later in the year, alongside the winter flu season.
21. Several key sources of information were used to evaluate and learn through the establishment of a Covid 19 Recovery Group which included:
- Feedback from HWFRS staff was obtained through an in-depth staff survey which around 50% of staff participated.
 - HWFRS internal debrief system.
 - LRF interim debrief report.
 - Department Heads and key managers in the Service reported weekly on their business continuity plan reviews, supported by the EPRO.
22. A full report of lessons learnt from the Covid pandemic is currently in draft form following collation of the information detailed above. An early assessment of this feedback is predominantly positive with the majority of staff and managers identifying that, considering the unprecedented and rapidly changing situation, the Service responded and adapted well, put in place appropriate arrangements for all staff and maintained core services throughout.
23. Based on the preliminary findings, SMB have already taken steps to improve certain areas, such as consolidating and significantly reducing the Service's Covid related communications, which staff felt had become repetitive and sometimes overly large. Other key areas also being explored are the wider use of some ICT systems and embedding flexible or agile working arrangements.

Next Steps

24. The Service will now need to consolidate and review its business planning arrangements and budgets for 2020-21 to fully understand the true impact of Covid 19 and the organisational disruption it has caused. Many areas of the Service will be impacted for several years and it is likely that further Covid related issues will continue to emerge for some time.

25. Covid 19 has created some areas for development and consideration that will be valuable for the future, such as agile working, new ICT systems and how, as responders, we can be better equipped and prepared to prevent the spread of diseases in our daily work.
26. The galvanising of a common purpose across the organisation has also seen the strengthening of relationships between staff, management and Representative Bodies. This has encouraged new agile ways of working and consulting, leading to the prompt delivery of mutually agreed solutions, which hopefully will form part of future working arrangements and relationships.

Conclusion/Summary

27. The Service not only performed well during the wide scale flooding in February 2020, but also throughout the many months of Covid response and recovery operations, and is now well placed to transition into the new normality that society faces. The Service also has the ability to further support other partner agencies with their changing priorities and needs as they emerge.

Corporate Considerations

Resource Implications (identify any financial, legal, property or human resources issues)	The resource issues relating to the Covid 19 response are significant but not part of this paper.
Strategic Policy Links (identify how proposals link in with current priorities and policy framework and if they do not, identify any potential implications).	None
Risk Management / Health & Safety (identify any risks, the proposed control measures and risk evaluation scores).	The H&S issues relating to the Covid 19 response are significant but not part of this paper.
Consultation (identify any public or other consultation that has been carried out on this matter)	N/A
Equalities (has an Equalities Impact Assessment been completed? If not, why not?)	N/A