



TYNE AND WEAR FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

Item No 4

MEETING: HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE 20 JULY 2020

SUBJECT: CORONAVIRUS – OVERVIEW OF WORKFORCE IMPACTS

JOINT REPORT OF THE CHIEF FIRE OFFICER / CHIEF EXECUTIVE (CLERK TO THE AUTHORITY), FINANCE DIRECTOR AND PERSONNEL ADVISOR

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Members a brief overview of the various impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic on the Services workforce, since the last meeting of the Committee in February 2020.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The evolution of the Coronavirus pandemic, its arrival in the UK and the national measures taken to respond to it have been well documented and reported. The local impact on the Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service (TWFRS) staff has been extensive, requiring dynamic change. At the same time, the Service has continued to provide all of its essential functions to the communities of Tyne and Wear; and has played a leading role in the Northumbria Local Resilience Forum (LRF), expanding its contribution through staff and volunteers who have responded to new needs arising from the pandemic.
- 2.2 Further reports relating to the additional aspects of the pandemic, including collaboration and partnership working were considered by the Authority at its meeting on 13 July 2020. Throughout the period since lockdown was imposed, weekly Member Briefings have been sent to all Members of the Authority to provide timely overviews of the progress being made.
- 2.3 This report will focus on staff health and wellbeing; communications and engagement, ways of working, business continuity, business improvement; health and safety and additional functions.

3. IMPACTS

Health, Wellbeing and Attendance Levels

- 3.1 Throughout the pandemic staff absence has been monitored daily and reported to through the Executive Leadership Team (ELT) and reported to the National Resilience Assurance Team (NRAT) to form a national picture to the Home Office. The absence reports use a national format and absence is classified as Covid-19 confirmed, Covid-19 suspected, Other Sickness, Self-Isolating, and the Overall Total. Absence levels for Control staff are also split out separately. In the period 23 March to 1 July 2020, the highest and lowest daily absence for each category was as follows:

Highest: 6th May

Description	Number		Percentage of FRS Total
Total No of Employees in your FRS	850		N/A
	Operational (includes Fire Control)	Non-operational	Percentage of FRS Total
Total No Personnel off Sick	34	22	6.59%
Total No personnel off sick CONFIRMED to have COVID-19	3	1	0.47%
Total No personnel off sick with suspected COVID-19	6	2	0.94%
Total No personnel self-isolating *	15	13	3.29%
Total No of Control Room personnel off sick (COVID and other)	4		0.47%

*Self-isolating can be due to any of the following:

- Being in an at risk group
- Share a household with someone who is symptomatic
- Caring for dependents/at risk relatives/someone who is sick

Lowest: 1st July:

Description	Number		Percentage of FRS Total
Total No of Employees in your FRS	850		N/A
	Operational (includes Fire Control)	Non-operational	Percentage of FRS Total
Total No Personnel off Sick	20	11	3.65%
Total No personnel off sick CONFIRMED to have COVID-19	0	0	0.00%
Total No personnel off sick with suspected COVID-19	0	0	0.00%
Total No personnel self-isolating *	9	8	2.00%
Total No of Control Room personnel off sick (COVID and other)	2		0.24%

- 3.2 Daily internal reporting of the data continues for now, although the national reporting frequency has been reduced to three times per week since 1 June 2020. In general, during May and June overall absence levels have been lower than in recent years, and the reasons for this are being explored.
- 3.3 The Services' Occupational Health Unit are undertaking individual health risk assessments with all staff who have been shielding, to inform individual action plans for employees to recommence working (although many have been working remotely).

Communications and Engagement

- 3.4 Maintaining communications and engagement with staff during the pandemic has been essential. Restrictions on close contact between staff and compulsory

homeworking for those who can have required the deployment of several new techniques and methods which look set to become permanent features of how the Service operates. The rapid deployment of the Microsoft Teams application within Office 365 to all employees with Service IT equipment and all stations/buildings has meant that meetings and all other face to face communication can take place online, with between 2 and 30 participants.

- 3.5 The fast moving pace of the actions required to manage our response to the situation led to the creation of a new set of regular meetings at different levels across the service, with the result that the volume of communication actually increased markedly. For example, the ELT initially held COVID-19 twice-daily briefings, which have now evolved into twice weekly briefings and reviews, together with weekly 'recovery' phase meetings for all Senior managers and key staff. Additionally ELT now hold regular Q&A meetings via Teams with all on duty watches on a regular basis.
- 3.6 In order to ensure that all employees could get anytime access to essential information and messages from the Service about how we were managing and responding to the pandemic, a new Covid-19 'Portal' was created using Microsoft Sharepoint, which can be accessed by any internet-enabled device including personal smartphones, and which has feedback and comment capability.
- 3.7 The technology measures how many users access each page of the Portal, and there is evidence that the vast majority of staff have been accessing the Portal. The Sharepoint technology also underpins the new Intranet, which was in the planning stage, and so the launch of this was brought forward to 1 June 2020, and this is already paying dividends in terms of accessibility to all staff at all times and ease of use.
- 3.8 Throughout this period all managers have continued to carry the responsibility for maintaining regular personal contact with all of their staff, including those shielding, absent or working remotely, in order to ensure that wellbeing and productivity were maintained.

Additional Staffing

- 3.9 The potential need for specific additional temporary staffing was identified in the first weeks of lockdown, at which point the likely levels of staff sickness absence and isolation were unclear and the priority was to ensure necessary levels of resilience in a fluid and uncertain situation. A full summary of the decisions taken by the Chief Fire Officer have been reported to the Authority at its meeting on 13 July 2020. These included variable hours Firefighters recruited from recently retired Firefighters, an additional Area Manager (AM) post filled by temporary internal promotion, and approval for some additional variable hours supervisory and managerial positions which have not been filled but remain available.

New Ways of Working / Business Continuity / Business Improvement

- 3.10 New ways of working have been essential to maintain the delivery of services and normal business as usual functioning of the organisation. For example, the Brigade Training Centre (BTC) has continued to deliver all risk critical training throughout this period with modifications to course design and delivery based upon new Risk Assessments and management controls to minimise the risk of

infection. In addition, an initial Trainee Firefighter training course has been running since 14 April 2020, this is believed to be the only one in the country during the early stages of this period, and the Risk Assessments written for this have been shared nationally via the NFCC and recognised as innovative exemplars, to support other Services in commencing similar programmes.

3.11 Following early commissioning of Productivity Analysis to support Business Continuity Planning in early stages of COVID-19, detailed findings have been documented for each Department / Service area by the Head of HR and Head of ICT, in consultation with all Head of Department peers forming SLT. The detailed documentation include an initial baseline assessment; review of factors impacting productivity and a RAG rating (documents available from Head of HR). The high level summary themes emerging from each area can be broadly categorised as follows;

- Technology inhibitors / enablers.
- Nature of work
- Capacity changes due to COVID

3.12 In terms of technology, the Head of ICT, supported by AM Clark have effectively deployed a range of technical solutions to increase productivity and to ensure the organisation has continued to communicate and function. They are now progressing plans, for trials and procurement of additional technology to further improve productivity, promote agility and drive continuous improvement. Consultation, costs and deployment of solutions are being explored through the Senior Leadership Teams (SLT) / Senior Management Group (SMG) structures, together with appropriate documentation to align with our existing and COVID augmented governance and reporting model.

3.13 In terms of nature of work and capacity changes, there has been some impact from staff shielding and absence from COVID related matters. Notwithstanding this, absence levels remain relatively low from COVID, and overall levels are below those anticipated in the workforce.

3.14 In terms of capacity, it is evident that due to a mixture of demand and working arrangements, the Strategic Response Model is being fully maintained, along with a range of key Services including, including HR, Finance, Estates and ICT. There are pockets of the organisation where productivity is evidently lower than in our planned operating model. This is in part by nature of the role; e.g. Prevention and Education and Station Administration, business services where front facing demand has significantly reduced; together with working arrangements; e.g. Technical Services Centre has been working revised shifts, seeing approx. 20%

reduction in capacity. It should be considered that the latter may provide opportunities to provide more flexible working practices for staff who have expressed a range of views on the temporary arrangements; together with distribution of resources levels to drive continuous improvement and outcomes for our communities.

Expanded Roles

3.15 Expanded roles for Firefighters have evolved at a national level through a series of temporary, tripartite agreements between the Fire Brigades Union, the National Employers and the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC), which have introduced

the possibility of Firefighters performing additional functions outside of the national role-map, for a temporary period while the pandemic persists. These functions are:

- Ambulance Service assistance: Ambulance Driving and Patient/Ambulance personnel support limited to current competence (Not additional Fire Rescue Service (FRS) First or Co-Responding)
- Vulnerable persons – delivery of essential items
- Covid-19 – Mass casualty (Movement of bodies)
- Face Fitting for masks to be used by frontline NHS and clinical care staff working with Covid-19 patients
- Delivery of PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Assisting in taking samples for Covid-19 antigen testing
- Driving ambulance transport not on blue-lights (excluding known Covid-19 patients) to outpatient appointments or to receive urgent care
- Driving Instruction by FRS driver trainers to deliver training for non-Service personnel to drive ambulances (not on blue-lights)
- The assembly of single use face shields for the NHS and care work front line staff
- Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people
- Known or suspected Covid-19 Patients: transfer to and from Nightingale hospitals under emergency response (blue light) or through non-emergency patient transfer (not on blue lights)
- Non-Covid-19 Patients: Transfer to and from Nightingale hospitals under emergency response (blue light) or through non-emergency patient transfer (not on blue lights) – this includes recovering and recuperating patients no longer infected with Covid 19
- Delivery of pre-designed training packages on Infection Prevention and Control, including hand, hygiene, PPE 'donning' & 'doffing' guidance and procedures; and supporting the care home staff testing i.e. to train care home staff to train others according to the principle of 'train the trainers.'
- Delivery of pre-designed training packages on Infection Prevention and Control, including hand, hygiene, PPE 'donning' & 'doffing' guidance and procedures; and supporting the care home staff testing i.e. direct to care home staff.

3.16 Whilst TWFRS staff have not been required to undertake all of these functions, which would be commissioned via the LRF, they show the range of the contribution that the sector as a whole has been making to the nation at this time.

3.17 In March 2020, the Service decided to establish a new Logistics cell, using existing staff and volunteers, to coordinate the receipt, triage and response in respect of requests for various types of additional support received from the LRF and directly from statutory and third sector bodies across Tyne and Wear. Work of the cell has included assisting at local mortuaries, delivery food parcels to shielding households and storing and delivering personal protective equipment (PPE) for health and social care providers across the region. The Cell has proved so successful that the work of the cell has, from June onwards, been integrated into the business as usual of the Prevention and Education Department.

Health and Safety

- 3.18 Employee Health and Safety has been at the forefront of our management of the pandemic situation, with a large volume of new risk assessments being produced for every type of work and workplace each time the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) guidance changed.
- 3.19 This period of the pandemic has been and continues to be a challenging period for the service and one which a great deal has been learned about how the Service can focus on and deliver on the priorities of our communities. Some activities has to be temporarily stopped or reduced to avoid face to face contact.

4. RISK MANAGEMENT

- 4.1 All of the impacts summarised in this report were subjected to rigorous risk assessment as they occurred to ensure that the risk to the Authority was been minimised as far as practicable. The assessments considered an appropriate balance between risk and control, the realisation of efficiencies, the most appropriate use of limited resources and a comprehensive evaluation of the benefits.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 All of the financial implications of the impacts summarised in this report have already been reported to the Fire Authority at its meeting on 13 July 2020.

6. EQUALITY AND FAIRNESS IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 There are no equality and fairness implications in respect of this report.

7. HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 There are no health and safety implications of this report.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 8.1 The Committee is recommended to:
- a) Endorse the contents of this report
 - b) Receive further reports as appropriate.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

The under mentioned Background Papers refer to the subject matter of the above report: