

TYNE AND WEAR FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

Item No. 10

MEETING: 12 OCTOBER 2020

SUBJECT: WORKING SAFELY THROUGH THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

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

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this paper is to highlight to members the work that has been undertaken to ensure that our staff and communities remain safe throughout the pandemic. Members are to be assured that the Service is a 'COVID-19 secure' workplace and has robust health and safety and business continuity arrangements in place to effectively manage the risk to our staff, volunteers and the community in the delivery of our statutory duties and additional activities.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Members will be aware that the Service has to comply with duties under the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974), (which extends to the consideration and management of risks from COVID-19), Civil Contingencies Act (2004) (as a 'Category 1' responder), and The Fire and Rescue Services Act (2004), (to establish and maintain effective business continuity arrangements whilst providing a Fire and Rescue Service).
- 2.2 Along with partners, throughout the pandemic, we have also had to adapt our practices to ensure that we adhere to national guidance and new legislation produced by Government, whilst continuing to maintain an effective and efficient emergency and community response.

3 WORKING SAFELY DURING COVID-19

- 3.1 The Service rapidly responded to the emerging global pandemic by enacting its robust business continuity arrangements which are aligned with the International Standard for Business Continuity ISO22301. These arrangements have continued to be regularly tested through exercises; some of which were 'no notice'. All lessons learned from our exercises are captured to help shape business improvements.
- 3.2 The pandemic has placed an additional burden on a number of departments in the Service and very early in the pandemic, a decision was taken to redeploy additional staff with the appropriate qualifications into the Risk Team. This

allowed the Service to adapt and update our risk assessments whilst keeping pace with the evolving national advice.

- 3.3 These Risk Assessments and revised ways of working for our teams have been successfully created and implemented through effective leadership and positive working arrangements with our Representative Bodies.
- 3.4 A Tripartite Agreement was jointly agreed by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) and the National Joint Council (NJC) for Fire and Rescue Services. These agreements formed the basis upon which TWFRS were able to work with local Representative Bodies to agree and produce local risk assessments enabling additional work to be undertaken by our staff in the community.
- 3.5 Members will be aware that TWFRS have been at the forefront of the national and regional response. Assistant Chief Officer (ACO) Heath is the NFCC Lead on COVID-19 and NFCC Representative and Chair of the 'Scientific Advisory Cell' established by the NFCC, utilising the Public Health and the Scientific team at West Midlands FRS. The Cell has reported into the NFCC Operations Coordination Committee (OCC) chaired by CFO Lowther. A key activity of the Cell has been to consider Public Health England, wider Government and health advice and how this was implemented within UK FRS' to ensure safety was prioritised whilst maintaining emergency services.
- 3.6 Having Officers leading and representing the Authority on these national forums has benefited us and has ensured that all of our procedures utilised the latest guidance.
- 3.7 The Service has developed a suite of management guidance for staff to safely resolve COVID-19 case incidents involving staff and premises. In the few cases experienced to date, the guidance has enabled all incidents to be effectively managed including a one-hour response to deep cleaning requirements across our estate ensuring all of our premises have remained open throughout the pandemic. This guidance has also been shared regionally and nationally and adopted by others within the sector as best practice.
- 3.8 A COVID-19 Health and Safety training package has been developed for all staff and shared with our partners.

4 NEW WAYS OF WORKING

- 4.1 The Service has developed and launched a new 'COVID-19 intranet portal' which has given all employees immediate access to critical information from any device or location including messaging aligned with government and Local Resilience Forum (LRF) communications. Our security controls have been enhanced to support agile ways of working including the provision of information security awareness for staff, and enabling multi factor authentication to control authorised access.

- 4.2 Video Conferencing using Microsoft Teams has revolutionised internal and external communication channels. This has included vlogs from department heads to keep teams across the Service connected and briefings with station based staff to maintain 'protection bubbles' and reduce the risk of contamination for operational staff to assure our operational response.
- 4.3 The Service have developed a home working policy, health and wellbeing risk assessment and individual risk assessments between Occupational Health (OH), managers and employees to support staff to return to work following shielding. Delivery of virtual OH and physiotherapy assessments have ensured staff continue to be supported. Virtual wellbeing sessions have also been delivered for staff across the Service incorporating wellbeing during a global pandemic and all managers have maintained regular contact with their staff to ensure their wellbeing.
- 4.4 Daily monitoring of absence data has assisted in supporting our staff and planning our response priorities to keep communities safe. Staff engagement with health and safety measures has supported some of our lowest absence rates in many years.

5 STAFF FEEDBACK

- 5.1 To help in planning our recovery after the initial response to the pandemic and to gain a greater understanding of how our staff have experienced working through the pandemic; meetings took place with Heads of Department who had been tasked to seek the views of their teams in response to the following questions:
- How have your teams been feeling about things over the last few weeks?
 - What have they learnt from the new ways of carrying out their work?
 - What would they want to change in how they work in the future?
- 5.2 There was a balance of feelings expressed by staff ranging from positive (motivated and proud) through to negative (isolated and challenged). In asking staff about what they have learnt, three clear categories emerged from the conversations; what people had learnt about themselves, about others and about the way they work, with a number of common themes relevant to each of them.
- 5.3 By using the pandemic as an opportunity to see how work could be carried out differently in the future, responses to the final discussion point of what staff would like to change about future work, again fell into three categories (Behavioural, Technological and Ways of Working). Common themes here included a desire to increase autonomy and further trust, better use of technology and a review of a number of different processes and policies to enable further improvements.

- 5.4 This information, has been considered by ELT, has been published to all staff and will be utilised as part of the TWFRS 2025 Programme. The Service is soon to embark on a similar exercise as we understand that the views and feelings of staff may change as we continue to work through the next phase.

6 COVID 19- Recovery Group

- 6.1 Regular meetings have taken place virtually throughout the pandemic attended by around forty senior leaders representing departments from across the organisation, working together to support our staff and community. Initially the group met on a weekly basis to discuss the response phase to the pandemic and this moved to preparing the Service for the next steps and consider our recovery phase to ensure that the Service remained prepared to respond to the ever changing environment.
- 6.2 Progress was measured and managed using an action plan and the work of the group formed regular updates to staff that were presented in the form of an 'ELT Update' published on our bespoke COVID 19 Sharepoint Portal. The use of the portal was vital to ensure staff could access essential information from any smart device with an internet connection.

7 ASSURANCE

- 7.1 Internal Audit has continued to review our areas of work within the Service and overall it was considered there was 'Substantial' assurance regarding the internal control environment including Business Continuity. We have further tested and exercised our health and safety and business continuity arrangements and found them to be robust. The Service business continuity exercises have been observed by a number of Fire and Rescue Services and adopted as a model for best practice. In addition, our risk assessments have been sampled by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).
- 7.2 The Service continues to build on its preparedness for future change in the COVID-19 alert level and business continuity for concurrent events with all staff offered a free flu vaccine.
- 7.3 The Service are also in the process of being inspected by Her Majesties Inspectorate of Constabularies and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS). The outcome of this thematic inspection based on FRSs response to the COVID pandemic, will be provided in a letter to the CFO in December 2020. We are confident that this will also provide the Service with a further level of assurance.

8 ROYAL SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF ACCIDENTS (ROSPA)

- 8.1 Whilst developing our response and recovery arrangements to the COVID-19 pandemic the Service also submitted a submission to RoSPA which referenced over 96 separate pieces of evidence and a range of accident, ill health and

enforcement data. In July 2020, the Service was awarded a prestigious RoSPA Gold Achievement Award, in recognition of practices and achievements for health and safety. RoSPA state that: *“Gold Award winners have achieved a very high level of performance, demonstrating well developed occupational health and safety management systems and culture, outstanding control of risk and very low levels of error, harm and loss”*.

9 OUR PERFORMANCE AND RESPONSE TO COVID 19

9.1 The Service has recently published an infographic for Members and staff to reflect on the achievements of the Service throughout the pandemic. This can be viewed in Appendix 1.

9.2 Our overall performance will also be captured in the outcome of our HMICFRS letter to be received in December.

10 RISK MANAGEMENT

10.1 Risk Management has been at the heart of all activities to ensure our workforce and communities remain safe through the Pandemic. Comprehensive and robust business continuity plans and risk assessments have allowed the Authority to deliver all of its statutory functions within a COVID Safe environment. The thematic inspection will review our approach to this risk management, and business continuity planning, and provide feedback on our performance including any areas of notable practice, and any areas for improvement.

11 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

11.1 The financial implications for the Authority have been reported separately to Members.

12 EQUALITY AND FAIRNESS IMPLICATIONS

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

13 HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

13.1 This report highlights to Members the positive actions that have been taken to support our staff throughout the pandemic.

14 RECOMMENDATIONS

14.1 The Authority is recommended to:

- a) Endorse the contents of this report
- b) Receive further reports as appropriate.

