

MEETING: 13 JULY 2020

SUBJECT: CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) HIGHLIGHT OF SERVICE ACTIVITY

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 In the year to date, this Service has had to rapidly evolve and adapt to ensure that we protect our staff and volunteers whilst maintaining the service that Partners and the Community of Tyne and Wear expect from us as an Emergency Service in the face of a global pandemic outbreak.
- 1.2 Members will be aware that TWFRS were judged as a 'Good' Fire and Rescue Service by HMICFRS in 2019 and our aspirations as a Service are to build on this grading as we seek to achieve 'Outstanding' in the Services we provide and the people we employ. Building on our existing foundations, this report provides an overview of how our agile Service has successfully adapted and continues to evolve during this period as we move to a new normality.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Members will be aware that the Authority has legal duties under both the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 as a 'Category 1' responder in addition to our primary legislation, The Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, to establish and maintain effective business continuity arrangements whilst providing a Fire and Rescue Service.
- 2.2 As a Fire and Rescue Service, we have robust business continuity arrangements in place and the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate to Members how TWFRS has adapted, evolved and supported our staff and the Communities of Tyne and Wear.

3 TWFRS RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC

- 3.1 The Service's ability to respond with partners to the pandemic has been enabled based on a combination of strong industrial relationships with our representative bodies, the unequivocal flexibility of our serving and retired staff members having a resilient 'can do' approach. Our numerous support departments have worked above and beyond to enable this Service to function effectively in unprecedented times.

- 3.2 This work has been recognised by partners and accolades include letters of appreciation from HRH Prince William, Lord Greenhalph, the Chief Constable of Northumbria Police and the Chief Executive of North Tyneside Council (SCG Chair).
- 3.3 The below paragraphs are a synopsis of the work that has been done and the impact that this has had on our Community.

4 SUPPORTING OUR RESPONSE

- 4.1 Our Health and Safety team have provided revised risk assessments to enable safe systems of work to ensure we can continue to deliver our services to the community whilst adapting to new ways of working jointly agreed with representative bodies. These include such task as body movement and recovery as part of the Local Resilience Forum, Excess Deaths work. The risk assessments have been recognised as best practice on a national basis and have been shared amongst the National Fire Chief's Council to be adopted by other Fire and Rescue Services.
- 4.2 The accelerated implementation of new technology and provision of equipment and software by our ICT department has equipped the Service with the systems and tools to work remotely and effectively throughout the pandemic. This has ensured the majority of our workforce have remained productive whilst working remotely. Video Conferencing using Microsoft Teams has revolutionised communication channels within the workforce and briefings with all 96 of the on-duty Watch are commonplace.
- 4.3 To ensure that all staff were able to access critical information whilst supporting those staff who are shielding, a dedicated COVID 19 SharePoint Site was set up in conjunction with our HR and Corporate Communications Team. This has proved to be an effective tool for all staff to access and provide information from any device or location.
- 4.4 The Estates and Facilities Department have had to adopt new ways of working and respond to urgent requests for 'Deep Cleaning' of premises where there has been the potential for virus spread from infected staff who have tested positive for COVID. This service has provided a one-hour response to cleaning requests across the Estate and all of our Service Premises have remained open throughout the period. The Estates team have also had to re arrange offices and areas to ensure safe social distancing and supporting our COVID Safe environment.
- 4.5 Our teams working at our Technical Services Centre have changed working patterns to increase productivity, working 07:00hrs to 19:00hrs on an alternate pattern to reduce the numbers and maintain social distancing, which has allowed for all mandatory vehicle and equipment inspections to be completed including the maintenance of NFRS Service Level Agreement.
- 4.6 Despite working remotely, our payroll services have operated successfully to ensure that all staff and suppliers are paid as normal. Our procurement and Stores teams have worked in extremely challenging conditions to ensure the resilience of our supply chains of key PPE and consumables is maintained.

- 4.7 From an absence management point of view, attendance levels across the Service have remained exceedingly high and well above the norm. This is testament to the flexible approach of our workforce in supporting the organisation throughout the pandemic. Absence levels are reported to Home Office on a regular basis to support the national picture.
- 4.8 It is also worthy of note that we have continued to grow as an organisation through the pandemic with several roles being recruited into using Microsoft Teams for interviews. We are also developing our latest cadre of Recruit Firefighters who are presently undertaking their initial training. Our instructors at the BTC have worked tirelessly to ensure a safe learning environment for our Recruits.

5 DELIVERY OF OUR CORE FUNCTIONS

- 5.1 Our Prevention and Education Teams have continued to protect and support the most vulnerable in our communities throughout lockdown. The department has carried out 455 home visits with 575 smoke alarms fitted. Multiple pieces of safety equipment have also been issued to households of the most vulnerable.
- 5.2 Fire Safety continue to support business by undertaking virtual meetings with a Fire Safety Inspector through Microsoft Teams. This is being promoted on our social media and website in addition to support from the Federation of Small Businesses and NECC Growth Hub. This has enabled the Service to support the Business Economy whilst re opening post COVID 19 closures.
- 5.3 The Service has successfully dealt with a number of challenging operational incidents during COVID19 across TWFRS in addition to supporting cross border incidents.
- 5.4 Throughout the period, the Service has maintained its delivery of risk critical training to all staff to ensure that the Service remains prepared to deal with all eventualities.

6 SUPPORT TO NORTH EAST LOCAL RESILIENCE FORUM (LRF)

- 6.1 This Authority has been at the forefront in supporting the LRF Response to the COVID 19 pandemic in the North East Region. This has included the coordination and distribution of PPE to the NHS and Care Sector and the establishment and leadership of the Excess Deaths Management Group. This allowed Local Authorities to be fully prepared in line with the governments reasonable worst case scenario figures.
- 6.2 Our Fire Safety Engineers worked with NHS colleagues and provided support and challenge to the design and layout of the Nightingale Hospital at Washington to ensure that a safe design outcome was achieved.

7 TWFRS LOGISTICS CELL

- 7.1 The Logistics Cell was set up in March 2020 to support TWFRS response to the COVID-19 pandemic and to manage all internal and external requests for support.

- 7.2 The Chief Fire Officer asked all corporate and support staff to volunteer if they are able, as well as former employees including firefighters who retired more than five years ago. At the start of June, 207 people had registered on our volunteer database: 139 staff and 68 ex staff.
- 7.3 At the end of May, there had been 1757 requests for support using a total of 77 volunteers totalling c.686.5 hours; Initially, the majority of requests were to support delivery of PPE to hospitals, care homes and medical facilities, via the Strategic Co-ordinating Group.
- 7.4 To ensure that TWFRS supported all partners in the community and that the most vulnerable were being assisted, the Service proactively reached out to our

local partners and charities to offer assistance. Some of these were new partners to TWFRS. This offer was positively embraced, and led us to providing support to, and enhancing our relationships with community groups who work with the most vulnerable people in Tyne and Wear. Organisations we are working with include Changing Lives, the Salvation Army and Pallion Action Group. There were 600 food parcels and care packages delivered to vulnerable people / families. We have taken the opportunity to include fire safety leaflets with deliveries to share safety messages with these vulnerable people.

8 RISK MANAGEMENT

- 8.1 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.

9 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 In recognition of the operational and budget pressures that the Covid-19 pandemic is having on public sector organisations, the Government has allocated additional grant funding to help meet this financial burden. TWFRS has to date received £1,120,705, with £284,000 spent by the end of May, an additional £320,000 projected to be spent by the end of September 2020, and further commitments of £107,000 to be paid by the end of 2020/21. This leaves approximately £409,000 (36.5%) uncommitted at this stage. Expenditure against this grant funding will be tracked, monitored and reported to Members later in the year, with the expectation that all of this funding will be fully utilised.
- 9.2 However, loss of income is another potential budget issue caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been estimated that in addition to all additional costs incurred by the pandemic by local authorities, income from Council Tax and Business Rates is expected to reduce nationally by 2.88% and 4.54% respectively. This position will be closely monitored throughout the year. A more detailed analysis of this is provided to Members separately at the 13 July 2020 meeting.

10 EQUALITY AND FAIRNESS IMPLICATIONS

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

11 HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

11.1 There are no health and safety implications in respect of this report.

12 RECOMMENDATIONS

12.1 The Authority 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:

