

## COVID-19 implications on governance arrangements

The Annual Governance Statement has been reviewed in light of Covid 19 as the pandemic impacted the Authority's governance arrangements which were adapted in response to the changing nature of the pandemic. The points below provide an overview of those arrangements and are aligned to the CIPFA / SOLACE principles of good governance.

The Authority will review the lessons learnt and adapt its working arrangements accordingly to reflect the more effective, efficient ways of working, particularly by harnessing a fuller use of technology that resulted from the impact of the pandemic .

### A. Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law

- To support the rapid developments associated with Covid-19 the Authority adapted a pragmatic approach to ensure decision making could occur at the required pace but with due regard given to maintaining robust governance and accountability arrangements together with the continued safety of staff.
- The Authority agreed the Chief Fire Officer (CFO) / Chief Executive (Clerk to the Authority) could use his Emergency Powers from the 18 March 2020, to ensure the continued operations and response of the fire service for the duration of the Covid-19 pandemic. The CFO was able to make decisions and take actions without immediate proactive recourse to the Authority given the urgent nature of many of the actions that would be required during the crisis. This situation and the course of action pursued is included in the existing Standing Orders of the Authority.

### B. Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement

- A clear governance structure for providing leadership, taking decisions and monitoring impact was established at the outset of the pandemic. Internally Covid-19 response meetings were established in January 2020, and later amended to response and recovery meetings in April 2020. During the initial stages of the pandemic the Executive Leadership Team (ELT) met daily (virtually) to provide direction to the Authority's Covid-19 response. An online Covid-19 portal was established to communicate key message to staff and weekly briefings were devised for Members to keep them apprised of plans and preparations in response to the pandemic.
- On 25 March 2020, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Parliament passed the Coronavirus Act 2020 and the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 (SI 2020/392: "the Flexibility Regulations"), which permitted Members of the Fire Authority to remotely participate in Fire Authority meetings, which the Authority was able to make extensive use of. Fire Authority and committee meetings were live streamed so the public could continue to participate remotely.
- The Service adopted a command and control structure, to support Service business continuity arrangements and also partner organisation locally, regionally and nationally. Staff took an active strategic role in the Northumbria Local Resilience Forum (LRF) and worked with strategic partners to coordinate a number of activities across the LRF geographical area. The Northumbria LRF worked alongside the

County Durham and Darlington LRF and Cleveland LRF to co-ordinate regional activities to ensure there was effective multi-agency planning for Covid-19. Each LRF set up a Strategic Co-ordinating Group (SCG), known as a Gold Command Group, and liaised as a cross region group.

### **C. Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social, and environmental benefits**

- The Authority's visions of *creating the safest community* supported by its mission: *To save life, reduce risk, provide humanitarian services and protect the environment* have been integral in shaping the response to the pandemic. The Service enabled staff to respond to calls for assistance from not only the public but the wider community partners across agencies, local authorities, voluntary organisations, NHS England, and the broader health sector.
- The Nightingale Hospital North East opened in Washington in April 2020, an existing building which was temporarily converted into a hospital. Staff from the Fire Safety department worked with designers, contractors and clinical governors to address fire safety measures, including fire alarms, improving compartmentation, and internal communications system, whilst staff from Operations and Service Delivery liaised to minimise the risk to crews during any emergency response.
- The Service established a logistics cell to triage requirements for the Service and partner agencies. 169 members of staff have volunteered to temporarily work alongside our partners, focussing on activity related to the fight against coronavirus to support the community as it recovers. All of this has been achieved whilst maintaining the emergency response to incidents
- Staff have coordinated the delivery of medical personal protective equipment (PPE), food parcels, prescriptions to people who are shielding, delivery of training to partners, and provision of support to local hospital mortuaries. This work made a huge contribution to frontline staff, local communities and the most vulnerable in society.
- With the introduction of community testing for coronavirus and the national vaccination programme staff supported a number of activities including administering lateral flow tests, marshalling at vaccination sites, being trained as vaccinators, and resource managers. Staff have directly administered over 5000 vaccinations to the people from our communities.

### **D. Determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of the intended outcomes**

- A recent inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) into the Authority's planning arrangements, response and ability to demonstrate effective service during the coronavirus pandemic resulted in an overwhelming positive outcome with the letter of outcome (dated 22 January 2021) clearly highlighting the excellent work being done by the Authority.
- The Authority's information communications technology enabled flexible working through digital/mobile technology and supported virtual meetings across the organisation. Despite the barriers faced to the delivery of services as a result the pandemic, new ways of working were implemented including:
  - All non-essential face-to-face contact ceased, with a move to digital and telephone communication where possible.

- Mobilising employees to adopt different ways of working including working from home.
- Providing priority services including assistance to partner organisations providing help to vulnerable people.
- The Authority has and will continue to make the interventions necessary during the pandemic and the recovery period to optimise the allocation of resources in relation to risk and demand.
- The Service acted promptly to engage key suppliers in line with guidance to maintain delivery of essential goods and services in order to protect our service requirements. We also reviewed and relaxed, where considered appropriate, our payment terms to acquire goods quickly and economically as the circumstances changed.
- The Authority will seek to learn from the experience and look for opportunities to maintain the positive effects. These include modern ways of working and reduced travel and carbon emissions.

#### **E. Developing the Authority's capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it**

- Strategically the CFO had daily contact with the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) and the Home Office, including daily briefings and weekly meetings. As part of the NFCC, the Service reported daily to the National Resilience Assurance Team (NRAT) across a series of questions about FRS resilience, which were consolidated into a single report to the Home Office, from the UK Fire Sector.
- Locally and in line with procedures for managing major incidents, the SCG comprising of members from emergency services, health services, local authorities and local government across the Northumbria area, liaised daily to discuss multi-agency planning. Supporting the SCG, was the Tactical Co-ordinating Group (TCG) which dealt with day to day multi-agency tasks such as managing local impacts through a number of themed sub groups to progress priority work areas. The Service deployed staff to lead the Excess Deaths Group and to support the Multi Agency Information Cell.
- The Service developed best practice guidance on staff degradation planning and reengagement of retired staff to support operational response; developed CPR and PPE guidance for Firefighters, flexible crewing arrangements, together with risk assessments and schemes of work enabling risk critical training to be undertaken. All of the above were shared with the NFCC for dissemination to other Fire and Rescue Services.
- The NFCC, National Employers and Fire Brigade Union (FBU) devised a tripartite agreement, which temporarily agreed activities beyond the normal role of a Firefighter, where support could be provided to colleagues in the NHS and Local Authorities. This unprecedented approach enabled the Service to support communities more broadly, whilst continuing to provide statutory emergency services.

#### **F) Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management**

- The pandemic initiated many significant risks to the Authority and to manage these effectively, key risks were monitored by ELT to ensure risks were being addressed

and mitigated. effectively. In addition, the Services business continuity arrangements remained under constant review and were tested throughout to ensure resilience.

- Working with Public Health England (PHE) and the Health and the Safety Executive (HSE) the Authority's robust health and safety arrangements together with its dedicated staff have ensured that the Service's workplaces have remained 'COVID Secure'. Testament to the Services cautious and pragmatic approach it achieved very high attendance at work figures throughout the pandemic, with absence rates ranging from less than one percent, up to just short of three percent.
- To support business continuity arrangements the Authority secured a supplier of flu vaccinations and took the decision to offer flu vaccination vouchers to all staff. This assessment of risk to staff and seeking to offer a protection against winter flu whilst the coronavirus remained in circulation. 350 (41%) staff requested the vaccination.
- While working in support of Health, NHS and other partners, staff were offered access to Covid vaccinations that would otherwise be spoiled or lost. Whilst the public vaccination programme has now caught up with vaccinations in terms of age groups, over 600 staff have received vaccinations and, in key roles such as the control room, all staff have been offered a vaccination with most taking up the offer.
- It is recognised that swift implementation of business continuity arrangements and emergency procedures reduced the risk of a breakdown in internal control systems. Regular monitoring and reporting through the pandemic Covid-19 about governance arrangements sought to eliminate the incidence of fraud and error.
- The potential financial impact of the pandemic response has been significant and initially there was no guarantee that this would be fully covered by government funding. Guidance on Covid-19 expenditure was issued to budget managers and requisitioners, and the frequency of monitoring and reporting escalated. The additional costs associated with Covid-19 were fully captured and were reported centrally to the Home Office via the NFCC.

#### **G) Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting, and audit to deliver effective accountability**

- Arrangements were made to accurately report Covid-19 expenditure internally and centrally to the Home Office via the NFCC monthly returns to account for the additional costs incurred and to provide evidence that additional grant funding was required from government.
- The Authority also introduced a revised Delegation process in order to control all costs associated with the pandemic and the process also brought order to all related activity and costs which had to be approved by the CFO in conjunction with the Finance Director. This meant the Authority had clarity over the costs incurred for all actions agreed and this also acted as good robust evidence of the use of the emergency powers used by the CFO in addressing issues and the associated costs incurred which are fully transparent and accountable.
- The Authority received £1.121m of additional funding from Tranches 1 and 2 of the governments Covid19 special grant allocations and recently was awarded a further £0.228m. The Authority continued to monitor its costs and also took advantage of government grant to compensate local authorities for loss of sales, fees and charges income in 2020/21. It reclaimed £0.134m in 2020/21 taking total additional grant to £1.483m. The Authority has a small balance of funds remaining of just over

£0.100m which it is placing in a special covid 19 reserve as it continues to monitor the financial impact of the coronavirus on its services during 2021/22 as the pandemic has not yet ended.

- Regular reports have been provided to members of the Authority on the use of the additional government grant funding and on all decisions made by the CFO whilst using his emergency powers in accordance with the Authority's Standing Orders and Scheme of Delegation.

