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Circular: 2020HOC0370MW

Date: 16 June 2020

To: All Members

Dear Brother/Sister

Test and Trace Initiatives

Members will be aware that Test and Trace initiatives are now underway in all parts of the UK. The schemes differ slightly in detail and in name between devolved administrations, yet the principles remain largely the same.

All initiatives will identify cases of Covid-19 through rapid testing of symptomatic individuals. If a positive test is registered, all the people who have been in contact with that person for long enough to be exposed to the virus will be traced and asked to self-isolate. There are some differences for health and care workers who may be asked to follow separate guidance in some areas.

Contact tracing is a long-established public health approach to containing the spread of infectious diseases and has proven to be effective in other countries to reduce the spread of the infection and save lives.

Although some of the details differ between different parts of the UK, all suggest that the four administrations are working closely together to ensure a consistent and joined-up approach to testing and tracing.

Test & Trace Workplace Guidance

Central government has produced guidance for employers whose employees may be contacted and asked to isolate, it states that it is vital for employers to play their part by:

- Making their workplaces as safe as possible.
- Encouraging workers to heed any notifications to self-isolate and supporting them when in isolation.

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Test & Trace in the FRS

The FBU position is clear, **there is no official exemption for FRS employees from test, trace and isolate strategies in any part of the UK and all FRS personnel should cooperate and comply with contact tracers when asked and heed any notifications to self-isolate.** This includes providing information to contact tracers on any close contacts within the workplace as instructed. It is also clear that FRS employers should support all staff to do so as required.

Close Contact & PPE

We are aware of recent communications from the NFCC advising FRSs to ask staff to state to contact tracers when they are wearing PPE and, when it becomes available, to turn off contact tracing apps if PPE is being worn.

We feel the decision on what constitutes a close contact, and in this instance whether any PPE being worn is appropriate, is a decision best left to public health experts. Therefore the FBU would strongly advise members to be honest about exactly what level and type of PPE was being worn at the time of any contact to allow professional contact tracers to make a safe assessment on the information available. The FBU believes that to turn off any contact tracing app would be taking the decision away from professional contact tracers or public health experts and place the burden instead onto FRS staff.

Cloth Face Coverings are not PPE

Cloth face coverings, which it is claimed provide some limited protection, are not PPE. If you were wearing a cloth face covering at the time of close contact it is important that you provide accurate detail on the exact type of covering you were wearing to contact tracers.

The Effects on Operational Resources

The FBU has made our position clear from the start that, regrettably, fire and rescue services were unprepared for the Covid-19 crisis. This state of unpreparedness does not seem to be confined to fire and rescue services. It is also clear that other public services did not have adequate arrangements in place to deal with the problems caused by the pandemic.

The current crisis cannot be separated from the long-term problems facing our service after years of fragmentation and underfunding. As a result of government cuts, we have seen some 20% of frontline jobs lost over the past decade alone. This has significantly weakened resilience across the UK. Yet FRSs may now need to plan to replace similar numbers of staff as a result of the current crisis and isolation.

It is clear that the isolation of large numbers of frontline FRS staff could have a negative impact on the resilience of our core functions in the FRS. How to best mitigate this, whilst still making the health, safety and welfare of our members a priority, is a matter for employers to discuss with FBU officials.

In summary, it is apparent that differing test and trace approaches in different parts of the UK, varied levels of PPE adopted on fire stations and appliances and the recent NFCC advice has caused a degree of confusion amongst members, we therefore would advise members in all circumstances:

- To familiarise yourself with the guidance produced by the relevant administration covering your FRS.
- To be clear, honest and thorough when providing information to contact tracers.

- To heed any notifications and instruction given to you by the relevant test and trace service.
- If you come across any difficulties locally or have any concerns, contact the relevant FBU official immediately.

Best wishes.

Yours fraternally

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Wrack'.

Matt Wrack
General Secretary

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