

FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE MATTERS

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TREMENDOUS RESPONSE BY FIREFIGHTERS TO COVID-19 - BUT MANY LESSONS FOR FUTURE PREPAREDNESS

Firefighters have responded magnificently to the Covid-19 pandemic, stepping up during this time of national emergency. But the positive work done by crews should not hide the lack of preparedness nor the need to prepare for further waves of this terrible virus.

The fire and rescue service response to the Covid-19 pandemic has been managed uniquely through the UK-wide tripartite agreement between the FBU, fire service national employers and chief fire officers.

TRIPARTITE AGREEMENT

On 23 March, the FBU signed a UK-wide tripartite agreement with fire service national employers and the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC). Existing collective bargaining arrangements at the UK-wide National Joint Council were central to this process. Firefighters committed to deliver essential items like food and medicines to vulnerable people; drive ambulances and assist ambulance staff; and move dead bodies, should the outbreak cause mass casualties.

On 9 April the agreement was extended to include face fitting for masks to be used by frontline NHS and clinical care staff working with Covid-19 patients and delivery of PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities. On 16 April the agreement was further extended to include non-blue light ambulance driving, Covid-19 testing and driving instruction by fire driver trainers to deliver training for non-fire personnel.

On 23 April, the agreement was further extended to include the assembly of single use face shields for the NHS and care work frontline staff, packing food supplies for vulnerable people and transfer to and from Nightingale hospitals. On 21 May, two further areas of work were agreed for training of care home workers. The whole agreement has been extended until late July.

The FBU's assessment of the agreement found:

- More than four-fifths of fire and rescue services have delivered packages of food, medicines and other essentials to vulnerable persons – the most frequent activity carried out by firefighters
- Three quarters of fire and rescue services have provided personnel for ambulance driving
- More than 70% of fire and rescue services have delivered PPE – mostly for the NHS and ambulance service
- Almost two-thirds of fire and rescue services have assisted with the movement of dead people to mortuaries
- Some 44% of fire and rescue services have assisted with face fitting
- Around four thousand personnel, including wholtime (full-time) and retained (part-time) operational firefighters, officers, control and support staff have contributed to these additional activities.

REGULAR WORK

In mid-March the FBU wrote to governments, fire employers and chief fire officers to ensure that non-essential activities firefighters normally undertake would cease. These included home fire safety visits, events at fire stations and some inspection work. The purpose was to prevent the spread of the virus.

However firefighters have continued to provide a 24/7 emergency service throughout the pandemic. This has included responses to domestic fires, fires at businesses, as well as wildfires. Although few figures have been published on this activity over the last three months, in Northern Ireland firefighters dealt with nearly 10% more incidents during pandemic than for the same time last year.

Thanks to the professionalism of firefighters, all fire and rescue service continued to function during the lockdown. Very few fire and rescue services in England and Wales reported problems with fire

appliance availability during the pandemic. From the beginning, some services had an increase in retained firefighter availability as a result of primary employers sending their staff home.

WORKFORCE ABSENCE

For all staff employed by fire and rescue services in England and Wales, absence from Covid-19 peaked at just over 4,000 (8%) on 29 March. Covid-19 absence was already more than 5% (2,400) in the days immediately before lockdown began. By 7 April it had fallen back to less than 6%. By 12 April it had halved from the peak – just over 2,000 absent (4%). By 17 May Covid-19 absence was under 1,200.

On 27 March, the highest Covid-19 absences were: Isles of Scilly 16%, Isle of Man 15%, Warwickshire 14%, Cleveland 12%, Nottinghamshire 11%, Cornwall 11%, London 11%, Essex 10% and South Yorkshire 10%.

By 13 April nearly 3,000 fire and rescue staff were in self-isolation and unable to work, representing 5% of the UK's overall fire and rescue workforce. Just under 2,600 were operational firefighters and control staff. The highest absences were Bedfordshire, Cleveland and London at around 9%.

Daily fire service absence in Northern Ireland peaked at 162 (8.2%) on 3 April and 4 April. By the end of May overall absence was less than 100 (5%). The figures include some staff shielded due to health conditions as well as absence with symptoms. The worst days for wholetime firefighters were 4 April and 5 April, when 9.5% were absent. The worst day for retained firefighters was 6 April, when 4.2% were absent.

In Scotland, absence for all staff on 20 March was 3.8%. At Easter, it had risen to 4.6%. By 24 April absence was 2.7%.

Control staff absence was generally higher than the overall fire and rescue service. At the beginning of April, 19% of NIFRS control staff were absent. Control staff absence in Wales peaked at around 15% for most days in the first week of April. In England, control staff absence peaked at 12% ON 30 March. Higher control staff absence persisted into April. By 22 April, control absence was still 12% in Wales and 8% in England as a whole.

Control staff absence in some brigades was also considerably higher at times. The highest absence was West Yorkshire control with 28% on 22 April, followed by Essex control on 3 May with 27%. North Wales had 20% control absence for much of April. Control rooms such as Tyne and Wear, Thames Valley, NWFC, Avon, Cleveland and Lincolnshire had 20%+ absence during this period.

SUPPLY CHAIN ISSUES

Fire and rescue services faced significant supply chain issues at the beginning of lockdown. On 26 March more than 80% of fire and rescue services reported having supply chain issues, with only eight not reporting any issues. The main issues encountered were the supply of respirators/dust masks, hand sanitiser and associated cleaning products (wipes, cloths) and Tyvek coveralls. A number of services reported BA supplier issues with cleaning products.

By 4 April, the majority of services indicated issues in obtaining face masks, respirators, cartridges, aprons, coveralls and similar associated PPE items. Some services reported problems with appliance spares due to a supplier lockdown abroad, while others had concerns about laundering fire kit and IT problems.

TESTING OF FIRE PERSONNEL

The FBU wrote to ministers on 20 March seeking testing for firefighters. This was finally granted on 17 April. Over the following two months, fewer than two thousand (1,895) tests have been carried out, with 231 testing positive. Around two-thirds of those positive tests were in April, very soon after fire personnel were included in the testing regime. The number of tests was not ramped up during May – in fact it plateaued. This suggests that at most only 3% of fire personnel have been tested.

The FBU also secured arrangements for annual leave, for retained firefighters' conditions and the circulation of safety guidance for firefighters.

Firefighters are proud of their contribution during the pandemic, but investment in the fire and rescue service is necessary given the challenges ahead. These include restarting a range of regular activities, while maintaining additional work. It also means preparing for further waves of this virus in the coming years.

