

EAST SUSSEX FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

Meeting	Scrutiny & Audit Panel
Date	12 November 2020
Title of Report	ESFRS Preparedness and Response to Covid 19 Pandemic
By	Assistant Chief Fire Officer
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Background Papers None

Implications

CORPORATE RISK	X	LEGAL	
ENVIRONMENTAL		POLICY	
EQUALITY IMPACT		POLITICAL	X
FINANCIAL	X	OTHER (please specify)	
HEALTH & SAFETY		CORE BRIEF	
HUMAN RESOURCES			

PURPOSE OF REPORT To provide The Fire Authority a briefing on East Sussex Fire & Rescue Service (ESFRS) preparedness and response arrangements to the Covid 19 Pandemic.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY The COVID-19 pandemic, also known as the coronavirus pandemic, is an ongoing pandemic of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). In January 2020 the World Health Organisation declared a Public Health Emergency and by the end of that month the first coronavirus cases were reported in the UK.

The pandemic has placed the most exceptional burden on society and has tested every part of our national, local and personal resilience yet throughout the crisis ESFRS has continued to meet its statutory duties, support the local resilience response and adapt its working practices to keep our own colleagues safe, well and secure.

Whilst the pandemic is far from over as we begin to see the full effects of the anticipated 'second wave' this report provides Members with an interim update on the preparedness and response arrangements put in place by

officers to respond to this unprecedented set of operational circumstances along with some key data and performance information during the crisis.

Recommendations

The Panel is asked to consider and assess the East Sussex Fire & Rescue Service preparedness and response arrangements to the Covid 19 Pandemic.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 First identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. The outbreak was declared a Public Health Emergency of international concern in January 2020 and a pandemic in March 2020.
- 1.2 By February 2020 the Sussex Resilience Forum (SRF) commenced weekly meetings to discuss the ongoing situation and at a meeting of the Executive Group a revised Pandemic Flu Plan was agreed. Simultaneously officers were reviewing the ESFRS business continuity plans and beginning to consider the likely impact of the pandemic.
- 1.3 By March 2020, when the pandemic was declared a major incident, ESFRS had fully implemented its business continuity plans and established the Emergency Management Team (EMT) and dedicated Covid Working Group (CWG) to manage the ESFRS response to the crisis.
- 1.4 Whilst the scale and impact of Covid-19 was unprecedented, ESFRS did have existing plans in place that we were able to implement and adapt to allow us to respond effectively to the immediate impacts of Covid and to develop and broaden further as the scale of the pandemic unfolded throughout the year.
- 1.5 Structure and communication are crucial in any major incident and this pandemic was no different. With a dedicated team of officers working full time on the response internally which ensured the Service could quickly respond to the dynamic and unique circumstances of the pandemic to adapt local policy to balance business as usual with the demands of the impact of the virus.

2. Resilience, Governance and Business Continuity

- 2.1 ESFRS have comprehensive business continuity plans and procedures that are regularly reviewed and tested to ensure that the Service is suitably prepared and ready in the event of a rising tide or emergency situation occurring in Sussex or beyond. These plans are linked to the Sussex Resilience Forum community risk register and include events such as major flooding, fire, fuel interruption, significant loss of staff, loss of power or pandemic flu.

- 2.2 ESFRS officers have a long standing role within the Sussex Resilience Forum, which ensured that at the very early stages of the pandemic, ESFRS were involved in the contingency planning and preparedness. In as early as January 2020 officers took part in pandemic contingency meetings as information on the scale of the virus became apparent.
- 2.3 Whilst the existing business continuity plans for both the SRF and ESFRS provided a useful framework for our response the scale and complexity of the pandemic required the Service to adapt our plans. However due to the impact of the virus more widely in the community much of the 'normal' demand on the Service initially subsided and did allow officers to be redirected to support the CWG. This initial effort ensured that key policies, procedures and risk assessments could be amended to allow the service to adapt its response accordingly.
- 2.4 Officers aligned the strategic response objectives to the SRF and NFCC to ensure consistency with an overall aim of maintaining our statutory duties, assisting the local resilience response and protecting the safety and wellbeing of our workforce. Officers also identified the importance of effective recovery, therefore some longer term plans were initiated to assist in recovery once this stage was reached.
- 2.5 Information flow and communication remains a crucial element of the response. The demand for information and data by MHCLG, NFCC, SRF, press and the workforce was considerable. Our communications cell worked around the clock to ensure that timely and accurate reporting could be provided alongside an adapted internal and external webpage to assist with the constant demand for updated information. Key stakeholders from across the organisation were seconded onto the CWG to ensure the best advice and information sharing such as human resources, health and safety, training and representatives from the Fire Brigades Union (FBU).
- 2.6 Liaison with the SRF was crucial and a number of officers were also seconded onto the forum during the pandemic to assist with the wider Sussex response to undertake lead activities for vulnerable people, tactical response and business continuity. This was essential to ensure that ESFRS was on the front line of the community response to support such activities as deliveries of food and PPE, checks on the vulnerable and wider coordination activities.
- 2.7 With the introduction of the *The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus)(Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings)(England and Wales) Regulations 2020* Fire Authority (FA) governance could be continued throughout the pandemic via video conference meetings. This ensured the normal business and decision making of the FA was uninterrupted and ensured for example that the 2020 consultation and decision making for the Integrated Risk Management Plans could proceed. The Senior Leadership Team meetings were also conducted as normal via video conference facilities.

3. Service Delivery during the Pandemic

- 3.1 Protecting the core response role and maintaining the safety of our front line crews was a priority and robust degradation plans, adapted operational procedures based on national guidance, additional Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and risk assessment ensured that throughout the pandemic operational response has continued.
- 3.2 Training and development was adapted to ensure that critical role base training could be maintained such as breathing apparatus and incident command. Training centre adapted the shift system to maintain resilience and as the lockdown measures were eased other essential training could be introduced such as driver and first aid refreshers. Other adapted ways of working included giving training via video conference and ilearn packages.
- 3.3 On Call availability improved during the pandemic as some on call colleagues found themselves working from home and therefore offering additional availability. Overall this improved on call appliance availability from an average of 75% up to 87% during the height of the pandemic. On call training needs had to be assessed due to the initial suspension of drill nights but by using ilearn packages and local ways of working allowed essential contact and core skills to be maintained.
- 3.4 The NFCC played a central role for the fire service by establishing a National Fire Gold Command to coordinate a number of activities and policies for the sector. Specifically the NFCC worked with the National Joint Council for Local Authority Fire and Rescue Services and the FBU to produce a number of 'Tripartite Agreements' that has allowed firefighters to assist ambulance services, deliver vital supplies to the elderly and vulnerable, assembling PPE, training care home staff in infection, prevention and control and move the bodies of the deceased. This national support has allowed local FRSs to determine what support they can provide the local or regional effort. Whilst ESFRS have been ready and able to support these activities the reality of the demand in Sussex meant that very few of these activities were used in practice; although officers have supported deliveries of PPE, food supplies and some firefighters have been trained to drive ambulances although this capability was not mobilised to date.
- 3.5 Although initially affected by lockdown and wider public health restrictions officers quickly adapted ways of working to ensure that vital prevention and protection activity was sustained. With a focus on the most vulnerable households and businesses within the community officers set up a number of new procedures to ensure ESFRS could safely and effectively continue to deliver our statutory community and business safety roles in the following ways:

3.5.1 Vulnerable people call scheme

Set up to identify existing clients from the HSV database who were considered to be vulnerable; living alone, lack of mobility etc. Staff from across the prevention department who were unable to undertake their primary roles, i.e. the Education Team, Prevention strand leads, were provided with lists of people to call and check that they were coping.

3.5.2 Befriending calls

This scheme was developed when the scale of isolation and loneliness within the community became apparent as a result of the vulnerable people call scheme.

3.5.3 Home Safety Visits (HSV)

Redesign of HSVs to comply with Covid legislation and guidelines. Lockdown and the high risk of virus transmission immediately stopped physical home safety visits from being undertaken. As a result HSV Telephone Assessments were designed and implemented along with risk assessments, tip sheets for staff and training. Telephone assessments where high vulnerability was identified were supplemented with Information Packs to provide home safety advice for people who can self-serve. In the most serious cases or referrals safe and well advisors carried out carefully assessed visits to the home.

3.5.4 Social Media messages

Provision of information on HSV, fire safety and wider prevention promotions on social media in order to maintain community confidence that HSVs were still available and ESFRS continues to reduce fire risk.

3.5.5 Creation of the HSV Task Force.

The task force was created when we started to see a decline dramatically during lock down in referrals from our partners. Weekly Webex meeting were originally set up to develop new ways of working and help generate HSVs and Action plan was developed including, radio interviews, promotional material, food banks, supermarkets, banners, radio ads, advice and guidance to parish and borough councils.

3.5.6 Cadets

Staff and leaders developed virtual web based sessions for both the Eastbourne and Crowborough cadet schemes. Cadets were also supplied with online resources, a weekly newsletter, a WhatsApp group and Instagram to maintain contact and involvement. In total 11 weeks of activities have been made available to cadets to keep them engaged at home. This has ensured that officers have maintained the full cadre of fire cadet members during the whole period of the pandemic.

3.5.7 Protection and business safety activity

The pandemic has required a diverse and innovative approach to regulatory inspection and enforcement that ensures continued community and business safety whilst

recognising the exceptional circumstances that prevail. Officers have applied a risk assessed approach to fire safety and utilised national guidance provided by NFCC which sets out how we should start to restart some activities on a proportionate basis which were previously suspended or reduced. Officers adapted fire safety delivery to target businesses where coronavirus could increase the risk of fire as well as continue to target life safety premises such as care and sheltered housing. Overall during the pandemic officers have given bespoke fire safety advice to 645 business premises. Other protection activity focussed on responding to complaints but also included general fire safety advice given out by the officers including a targeted campaign to contact all care homes in the county.

3. New Ways of Working

- 3.1 Throughout the Service colleagues had to adapt to new ways of working in order to maintain our response to the pandemic and maintain as much business as usual as possible. Working from home has expanded significantly with adapted policies and use of technology supporting colleagues ability to operate effectively remotely.
- 3.2 Rota patterns and shifts for staff have changed to allow them to meet COVID secure controls (Limiting numbers) for example at training centre and most offices colleagues work different patters to reduce contact and exposure to others but still having access to the workplace and maintain core services.
- 3.3 Technology played a major role in adapting work practices. The Service already had in place a plan for introducing greater functionality for video conferencing and the facilities for remote working were well embedded. This gave the service a head start in working flexibly and colleagues and teams soon became familiar with the use of WEBEX to have department meetings, welfare checks and maintain contact generally. The sharing platform *Workplace* was used to good effect to share stories and thoughts to assist the feeling of contact and engagement and informal groups and teams were established using *WhatsApp* groups to engage with and check on staff welfare.
- 3.4 Virtual working for training, prevention and protection delivery all proved successful creating a positive legacy opportunity for the future.

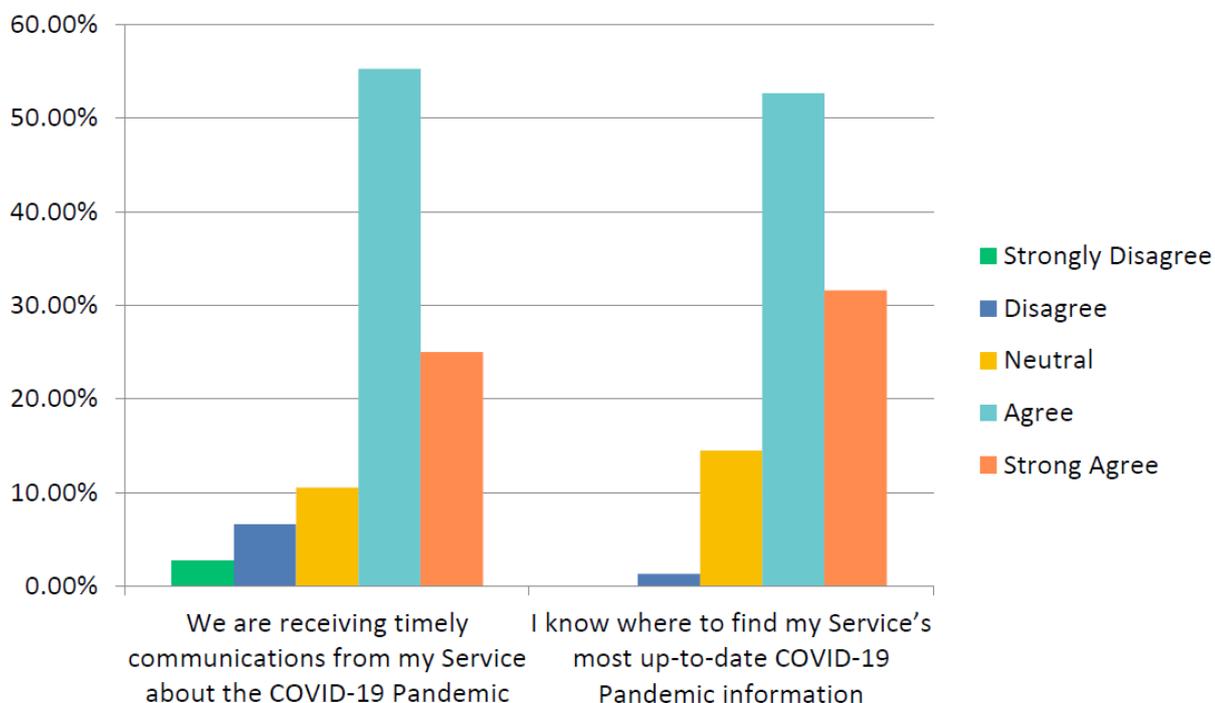
4. Welfare and Well-being

- 4.1 Welfare and wellbeing for all ESFRS staff formed a key part of the strategy for responding to the pandemic. *Wellbeing* was added to every meeting agenda to ensure that the conversation and culture of welfare and support was a *golden thread* throughout the response given the exceptional and unprecedented nature of the incident.
- 4.2 A dedicated welfare cell was established to support the CWG with membership from health and safety, HR, occupational health and communications. The cell as lead by the Assistant Director People Services.

4.3 During the height of the response the cell launched a Wellbeing survey in May 2020 which ran for 6 weeks until Friday 10th July with the aim of capturing feedback directly from our staff regarding the impact on their wellbeing during the pandemic and identifying any areas where we can further support or improve our current provisions. We had 76 responses which is 9.5% of our workforce, key themes that ran through the survey were:

- Contact from line managers
- Future and the returning to work for those working at home.
- Communication
- Health and well-being

4.4 The following table is an extract from the survey which outlines the response to communication and awareness and shows a positive picture for the level and availability of information.



4.5 Comprehensive health and safety risk assessments were introduced specific workplace and individual Covid assessments.

4.6 The welfare cell set up a comprehensive internal web page to ensure colleagues had access to up to date and accurate information. Links to health and fitness, nutrition, financial and mental health guidance were included. Supporting this was a regular staff newsletter and regular email and service brief updates.

4.7 Some of the most powerful and successful welfare approaches came from the ideas from staff who innovated using the sharing platform *Workplace* to set up on line forums to share ideas, thoughts and musings to help the sense of working together whilst being apart. As well as helping colleagues keep in touch throughout the pandemic we

also have learned some interesting facts about colleagues favourite pets, favourite bands, how to do the kids homework and even some gardening tips.

5. **Performance and Outputs**

5.1 During the 3 months April to June 2020 the Service delivered the following performance outputs.

Category	Performance output
All incidents	2,364
Control room 999 emergency calls handled	3,391
Information safety packs and smoke detectors delivered.	1,058
Faulty alarms in properties (replacements at property)	130
Assistance (pastoral) calls to vulnerable people	1,798
Welfare doorstep visits.	360
Home safety telephone assessments.	1,483
Protection and fire safety advice to business premises	645
Appliance availability	87%*
Sickness absence - shifts lost per employee	0.9**

* 2019/20 overall appliance availability on was 75%

** 2019/20 the average quarterly sickness shifts lost was 2.5 per employee

6. **Financial Impact**

6.1 A Covid-19 grant was allocated to the Service to alleviate an increase in expenditure and shortfall in income relating to Covid-19. £137,000 (tranche 1) was allocated toward the end of 2019/20 and the allocation for 2020/21 is £633,000 (tranche 2). No grant was awarded to ESFRS for tranches 3 & 4 and it is unclear whether any further grant to support the ongoing costs of the pandemic will be forthcoming.

6.2 The grant has helped the Service respond effectively and has been used to support a number of secondments, overtime and additional cleaning. The summary position as of September 2020 is as follows:

	£	£
Grant	770,000	
Savings	395,000	
Expenditure		790,000
Loss of income		165,000
Total	210,000	

Estimated collection funds impact 2021/22 onwards		1,800,000
Total Net Impact		1,590,000

It is important to note the following in relation to the above figures which are taken from the monthly cost tracker submitted to NFCC / HO:

- Savings – the majority of this figure reflects underspending in training (£302,000) during the first 6 months of the year. The training team are developing a recovery plan and it is likely that a significant proportion of the underspend will need to be held to fund training delayed and also to reflect the additional costs of delivering Covid secure training – the real saving is expected to be significantly lower. Savings in fuel and travel and subsistence in the first 6 months totalling £50,000 have been realised.
- Loss of income – the majority of this figure (£115,000) reflects forecast loss of Treasury Management income above the budgeted level of £75,000 and is based on returns that would have been achieved had rates remained at their pre-Covid levels. This income loss is not recoverable through the Income Loss Compensation Scheme.

In overall terms we are currently forecasting that in-year increases in costs and loss of budgeted income will be covered by a combination of grant, income loss compensation and savings, without the need to call on reserves. This situation may change if there are material additional impacts from a second wave. It is uncertain if any further grant funding will be made available therefore officers are working to identify ways to ensure expenditure remains within budget. The Government has indicated collection fund losses could be repaid over a number of years although exact details are awaited.

- 6.3 Longer term financial impact of the pandemic is uncertain, the Medium Term Financial Plan reflects this uncertainty in national funding and gives more detail on some of the likely impacts. There may be delays to capital projects and Covid 19 will continue to impact on the Authority's finances through 2020/21 and more markedly into 2021/22 where impact on both the Business Rate and Council Tax Collection Funds will be felt, along with a reduction in Council Taxbase growth. .
- 6.4 The Government income compensation scheme provides compensation for a proportion of budgeted loss of fees and charges income due to the impact of Covid-19 in accordance with the scheme principles. Whilst the impact for ESFRS is low, a submission has been made to the Home Office for the income loss on commercial training (£18,000) and dry riser testing (£3,300) income covering the period April to July 2020.

7. Lesson Learned and Recovery

- 7.1 Recovery and governance were very early priorities for the EMT. This ensured that records of meetings, key decisions, risk logs, and policy changes were recorded throughout the response. This process also included a number of 'hot' and formal debriefs to assess the progress, take stock of the impacts and ensure a clear 'lessons learned' record was being recorded.
- 7.2 When the major incident and response phase was stood down the CWG initiated recovery more formally and the recovery process began. Given the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic recovery was considered not just in terms of return to normality but also what has changed and would be useful to keep for example flexible and remote IT working?
- 7.3 One of the first roles for the recovery group was to undertake a thorough and formal debrief of the response phase of the incident. A significant amount of learning was captured in order to determine what went well and where lessons needed to be learned for the future. A summary of the key learning points are listed below:

7.3.1 IT

A need for additional IT Hardware such as 2nd screens, room kits and work mobiles for those working from home.

7.3.2 Communications

Ability to send Text Alert for critical communications; greater clarity needed with communications for grey book (mainly operational) & green book staff and Intranet page layout structure needs more clarity.

7.3.3 Logistics

Introduce central stores to improve stocks of critical items such as PPE

7.3.4 Business Continuity

Review of BC plans and clarity on communications and version control of key incident documents.

7.3.5 Service Delivery

There are a number of positive legacy changes that are likely to be adopted as business as usual particularly in prevention and protection where the innovative virtual way of delivering home and business safety messages have been very successful

These and many more learning points are being monitored and implemented via an action plan monitored by CWG and EMT.

7.4 Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabularies and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) will be conducting an inspection from the 3rd until the 13th November which will provide an external assessment to examine how fire and rescue services are responding to the pandemic. Specifically the HMICFRS will be asking:

- What is working well and what is being learnt?
- How the fire sector is responding to the COVID-19 crisis?
- How fire services are dealing with the problems they face?
- What changes are likely because of COVID-19?

8. Conclusion

8.1 ESFRS had robust and up to date business continuity plans to assist in managing a major incident which included generic response plans and specific pandemic flu plans.

8.2 These plans were adapted to meet the exceptional scale of the pandemic which included a full time working group made up from representatives across the Service to ensure that adapted ways of working and policies could be implemented to ensure as far as reasonable normal business activities could continue and resilience and operational response was unaffected.

8.3 Liaison with key stakeholders the SRF and NFCC ensured consistent and joined up messaging.

8.4 Other priorities focussed on staff wellbeing, communication and recovery. Introducing a structure of officer led workstreams ensured these key activities and objectives were met throughout the pandemic.

8.5 Focussing on ESFRS statutory duties using innovative procedures ensured good levels of performance and targeted support to vulnerable people and businesses.

8.6 Early consideration of a recovery cell has ensured that the learning from the pandemic is being monitored and implemented by the CWG to ensure that as far as possible a positive legacy can be taken from the crisis. Although the longer term organisational and financial impacts on the Service are hard to measure, the sustained focus on well being