

Status of Report: Public

Meeting: Combined Fire Authority

Date: 2 December 2021

Subject: LFRS response to the Covid-19 pandemic

Report by: The Chief Fire and Rescue Officer

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For: Information

Purpose

1. The purpose of this report is to inform the Combined Fire Authority of the positive feedback received from staff and partners on the Leicestershire Fire and Rescue Service's (LFRS) response to the Covid-19 pandemic in the period March 2020 – August 2021.

Recommendation

2. It is recommended that the Combined Fire Authority notes the positive feedback received from staff and partners on the Service's response to the Covid-19 pandemic in the period March 2020 – August 2021.

Executive Summary

3. This report demonstrates how the Service's response to the Covid-19 pandemic was good when measured against standards and legislative requirements. The effective response kept staff and communities' safe.
4. Positive feedback from the Local Resilience Forum (LRF), detailed in paragraphs 17-18 of this report, confirms that the Service also met Civil Contingency Act requirements delivering multi-agency support in a number of key areas.
5. The pandemic has been challenging as highlighted within this report. The Service met the challenge and, as the recovery phase of the pandemic is implemented, the Service reflected on its performance by conducting an internal debrief.
6. Findings are detailed at paragraphs 20 - 62 of this report and only *key areas* of 'learning identified' are included.

Background

7. The Covid-19 pandemic presented a number of challenges to LFRS. Along with keeping key staff safe in the workplace the Service had to be innovative to maintain an effective response to communities. New methods of working, decontamination and support were required as the virus was not fully understood.
8. The speed of change provided significant challenges to the Service. Guidance changed on a frequent basis at short notice: Personal Protective Equipment supply chains were disrupted and implementing the working from home directive needed support, are just a few examples.
9. The LFRS debrief procedure promotes a culture of open and honest learning, free from blame. The procedure dictates the Service is measured against standards, where available, to provide an objective measure of performance and any learning that can be taken to embed notable practice or improve for the future.
10. The Senior Management Team (SMT) agreed which of the national standards identify Major Incident management requirements and link to staff welfare and wellbeing. These are:
 - i. Civil Contingencies Act 2004 and its non-statutory supporting guidance
 - ii. National Operational Guidance (N.O.G) for Major Incidents
 - iii. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) inspection report 2018/19
11. A range of material was reviewed (see paragraph 16) to provide evidence of compliance against these standards. To evaluate LFRS staff assessment of the response an internal survey was conducted to support the debrief.

The Survey

12. An internal debrief team reviewed the agreed standards in paragraph 10 above and developed four key questions to answer:
 - i. How well did we look after our employees?
 - ii. Was LFRS adequately prepared to deal with a Major Incident such as a pandemic?
 - iii. How effective were we at keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks?
 - iv. Did we support multi-agency partners adequately?

13. The LFRS Data Management team created a survey of 14 sub-questions to provide quantitative and qualitative data which would be used to measure LFRS performance against the four key questions detailed above.
14. The survey was available online to all staff from 26 June to 30 July. Screensavers, weekly communications and face to face interaction was used to publicise the survey.
15. Trade Unions were not consulted but access to the survey was available for all.
16. Performance of the Service against each of the four questions (detailed in paragraph 12) was measured using the following information:
 - i. Survey of all staff with 124 respondents (64 operational and 60 support)
 - ii. HMICFRS *Covid-19* inspection findings (outcomes published 22 January 2021)
 - iii. Internal Business Continuity Exercise: Petunia I and Petunia II (assurance exercises to test preparedness covering internal and external activity)
 - iv. National Fire Chief's Council (NFCC) Covid Recovery Guidance
 - v. Findings from LFRS Internal Recovery Group (this group sought and monitored learning throughout including national and LRF)

Multi-agency partner responses

17. The survey covered internal staff and a different approach was used for working with multi-agency partners. The Service separately requested and received feedback into the Internal Recovery Group from partners in the LRF.
18. This approach was preferred as an intermediate debrief conducted by the LRF had already taken place and a formal multi-agency debrief is to take place shortly. To request partner's response to an LFRS specific survey when they are trying to recover from the pandemic did not seem appropriate.

The findings

19. The findings for each question are set out below. Each section details what lessons have been learned, how the Service has improved in response to the findings and further actions/recommendations to be addressed.

Question 1 - How well did we look after our employees?

20. The Senior Management Team (SMT) supported the 'stay at home' guidance from the start of the pandemic. Those who could work from home were quickly provided with ICT equipment to do so.
21. Of those who could work from home 86% (on average) chose to do so. Individuals with personal circumstances that wished to attend their workplace were supported in doing so.

22. 73% of staff felt safe or very safe at their place of work (station, office or home) during the pandemic. Health and safety procedures were followed where local outbreaks (six) occurred.
23. A staff member raised a concern directly with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). The Service provided a robust response to which a very positive response from the HSE was received and the matter was closed.
24. Public Health England (PHE) separately conducted a random spot check on Covid-19 compliance at one site and again were reassured by the protective measures employed to ensure employee health and safety.
25. 43 Covid-19 related risk assessments were completed to support staff in working safely. Control measures were specific to certain needs. For example, only Fire Control operators were allowed to attend the Fire Control centre to ensure those staff were protected to maintain an effective operational response.
26. From April 2020 – March 2021 overall sickness decreased by 19% for whole-time staff and 40% for support staff.
27. Only 43% of staff surveyed felt risk assessments were effective or very effective but the evidence of Covid-19 sickness levels supports that they *were* effective. For 11 weeks between March and June 2021, the Service had zero Covid-19 cases in the Service across all staff.
28. Over 50% of staff took part in the Covid-19 health and wellbeing passport initiative. The HMICFRS Covid-19 inspection identified through their survey of LFRS staff that most respondents knew where and how to access mental health and wellbeing support if needed. 60% of people felt the guidance and advice was effective/very effective; 27% voted neither way.
29. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was always suitable or exceeded requirements (e.g. face masks and pathogen barriers in fire kit) and were available on time. There was a National scramble for PPE but LFRS secured PPE whilst achieving value for money as prices on some products increased.
30. Government guidance and messaging changed frequently. Three out of four staff members were satisfied or very satisfied with the Service's communication. The HMICFRS Covid-19 inspection also agreed that communication to staff was effective.
31. Safety critical training for staff was quickly identified for continued face-to-face training. This prevented a back-log of accreditations to be completed once normal service resumed and ensured that competent staff were always available.

32. Where training was not safety critical a range of blended learning (e.g. interactive online learning) was used to maintain learning and development. This innovative and creative approach is now being embedded where appropriate.
33. The table below shows the learning identified from the review, details how the Service has improved and the recommendations for future action in similar circumstances.

Learning identified
Range of communication methods (Video communications or 'Vlogs' in particular) were beneficial to staff
Safety critical information was communicated but confirmation that staff had read it could not be obtained
Addressing the needs of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff members with underlying health problems required more structure
Implementing control measures from risk assessments across the estate could have been quicker
Existing regional health and safety partnership's supported quick delivery of risk assessments to support additional work
Quick support from the ICT department facilitated home working without impacting activity
How has the Service improved?
Covid-19 passports have become health and wellbeing passports and the Service has shared this learning with HMICFRS
Safety critical messages are recorded on the online Learning Management System and reporting on number of staff reading them provided
Online meetings continue with efficiency savings as well as reduced travel and physical numbers in attendance
Hybrid working procedure has been developed following 12 months of live usage and a dedicated 6-month documented trial
Mixture of face-to-face and online learning to continue and improved content being provided
Recommendations
Review pandemic response plan and include Business Continuity exercise learning
Implement Microsoft Teams in LFRS to continue use of online meetings
Embed the Covid-19 passports in the service as Health and Wellbeing passports which will have a wider remit

Question 2 - Was LFRS adequately prepared to deal with a Major Incident such as a pandemic?

34. The LFRS Integrated Risk Management Plan is based around foreseeable risk and how this will be managed with the resources available. The Service recognised the risk of pandemic diseases (since at least 2019) in the Organisational Risk Register and had an in-date plan. It was activated on 24 March 2020.
35. The plan could not account for some of the specifics related to Covid-19 (social distancing, lateral flow testing etc.) as they were new and previously unknown control measures, but it allowed an initial response to the pandemic without delay. The plan was updated with learning as the pandemic evolved and business continuity exercising was successfully undertaken twice within this period.
36. Business continuity management arrangements were put in place and 78% of staff who responded to the survey either agreed or strongly agreed that the same level of operational response was in place. Response data shows a 9% increase in fire engine availability from the previous year.
37. Work was undertaken within the multi-agency response framework set up by the Local Resilience Forum, participating in Strategic and Tactical Management arrangements as well as multiple response sub-groups (e.g. PPE cell, communication cell, Key-worker accommodation cell).
38. HMICFRS agreed that pandemic and associated plans were in place, in date, suitably detailed and updated as new information emerged.
39. Like many other businesses LFRS use a 'just-in-time' model for consumables. The Service had the foresight to place early increased orders, however, supply was redirected to areas such as the NHS. 60% of staff surveyed said supplies were effective or very effective; 16% voted neither way.
40. During world-wide PPE shortages work was undertaken with suppliers to identify innovative methods to control the Covid-19 risk and maintain response capabilities during a Major Incident. Examples include: alternative cleaning method for Breathing Apparatus sets and a new method for decontaminating firefighters face mask filters.
41. The table below shows the learning identified from the review, details how the Service has improved and the recommendations for future action in similar circumstances.

Learning identified
Stores and procurement department innovated and adapted to supply chain issues
Skype for business was seen as ineffective. Rapid replacement by Zoom was seen as a positive step.
The supply chain was reviewed to establish single points of failure
How has the Service improved?
Pandemic response plan and degradation procedure revised continuously
Identified and implemented a range of alternative suppliers to mitigate future supply issues
Stores of PPE have been increased with a two-month supply of key consumables as a standard introduced
Recommendation
Participation in multi-agency debrief process and winter preparedness exercise
Finalise review of PPE suppliers and stock levels/rotation

Question 3 - How effective were we at keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks?

42. The HMICFRS report evaluated evidence LFRS provided and confirmed the Service continued to provide statutory functions throughout the pandemic in line with advice from NFCC.
43. Between 1 April and 30 June 2020, the average overall fire engine availability was 90.1% compared to 80.9% for the same period in 2019. This was largely due to furloughed On-Call staff being available and the predicted 'mass staff absence' not materialising. The degradation procedure (covers increasing loss of appliance availability) was in date and was not required during this time.
44. Response times improved compared to 2019. Lower sickness levels, higher appliance availability and fewer vehicles on the road were the contributory factors to the continued effective response.
45. LFRS conducted fewer face-to-face Home Safety Checks (HSC) as a result of lockdowns. However, the Service did move quickly to using the telephone to complete HSC in order to maintain the prevention programme. 6,824 of 15,300 HSCs completed between March 2020 and August 2021 were made by telephone resulting in more vulnerable members of the community being supported.

46. Fewer fire safety audits were completed as activity was significantly reduced during lockdowns. This had a short-term impact on the Risk Based Inspection Programme (RBIP) target. By using staff flexibly, the RBIP yearly target was exceeded for the year. A total of 600 Fire Safety Audits were completed.
47. Staff in these departments could have been used more flexibly to support other departments which saw an increased workload due to additional activities requested by the LRF.
48. The Service played an active part in the LRF Communication Cell. 'Warn and Inform' Covid-19 messages from the Cell were shared by the Service. LFRS did not sign-post/share this common messaging frequently and this should improve.
49. Leicester City Council requested that LFRS conduct Covid-19 compliance checks in businesses in Leicester City. This supported the Public Health strategy in Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland (LLR) to keep people safe from Covid-19, and also LFRS fire safety aims.
50. Government funding was used to support the pandemic response. The main costs were attributed as follows: £177,000 to extra staffing costs, £133,000 for technology, £51,000 for PPE and £35,000 for cleaning and decontamination costs.
51. Covid-19 grant money provided by the Government will be used by the end of the financial year 2021/22. HMICFRS reported that the Service maintained value for money and mitigated the financial risks that arose during this period.
52. The table below shows the learning identified from the review, details how the Service has improved and the recommendations for future action in similar circumstances.

Learning identified
Earlier recognition where resources become available or are stretched during a Major Incident and redistributing them
Limited LFRS sharing of common messaging from LRF around Covid-19 and 'Warn and Inform' the public.
How has the Service improved?
Recognising the benefits of telephones HSCs and feeding this back at a National level.
Recommendation
Include evaluating staff activity and redistribute where the need is in pandemic arrangements and as a business practice where applicable
Include in the pandemic and Major Incident plan the need to share "Warn and Inform" messaging through communication platforms <i>as well as</i> the LRF. The Service should <i>monitor</i> the reach of these messages to others.

Question 4 - Did we support multi-agency partners adequately?

53. The Civil Contingencies Act (CCA) 2004 and supporting non-statutory guidance says responding agencies should work together before, during and after incidents including a Major Incident and:
- i. Put emergency plans in place
 - ii. Put business continuity management arrangements in place
 - iii. Put arrangements in place to make information available to the public about civil protection matters and maintain arrangements to warn, inform and advise the public in the event of an emergency
 - iv. Share information with other local responders to enhance co-ordination
 - v. Co-operate with other local responders to enhance co-ordination and efficiency
54. The first Strategic Coordinating Group (SCG) under a Major Incident was held on 24 March 2020. A Tactical Coordinating Group (TCG) and several supporting cells were established through the LRF arrangements.
55. There was Fire Service representation on *all* relevant groups *throughout* the response phase of the pandemic and now into the recovery phase a representative on the recovery group is maintained.

56. Information was coordinated in these meetings and decisions and activity shared with all partners. LRF debriefing identified that all partner agencies felt communication was effective and that all partners worked together to share information.
57. Partners in health and social care settings and the wider LRF requested support in a number of areas. LFRS Operational and Support staff supported amongst other activities:
- i. East Midlands Ambulance Service for Urgent Care patient transport
 - ii. Providing a key-worker accommodation process for staff who wished to protect their families by staying in hotels during the first waves
 - iii. Collecting and delivering prescription drugs for vulnerable members of the community
 - iv. Making protective face visors for the care sector
 - v. Face mask fit-testing for local care workers
 - vi. Stored PPE and delivered to health care settings
 - vii. Delivered food parcels to households and foodbanks
58. Evaluating the true success of each of these activities is difficult due to the number of individuals in the number of organisations, care homes, etc. Some comments from the LRF include:
- i. *“Leicestershire Fire and Rescue Service played a key supporting role to LRF partners in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, assisting with pandemic response as well as stepping up in the response to other concurrent emergencies.”* Julia Draycon, LLR Prepared Partnership Manager
 - ii. *“LFRS has been an integral part of the LRF during the pandemic...allowing us to store emergency stock at one of your stations...to an ad-hoc callout system which meant we could access it whenever we wanted was particularly helpful. Also the support you gave us in relation to AGP [Aerosol Generating Procedures] and Face fit testing was an invaluable service at a time of real need. We wouldn't have been able to do that without the LFRS and it certainly made life easier (and safer) for the most vulnerable in our communities”* Jason Ross, LLR Prepared Resilience Officer
 - iii. *“invaluable assistance to the PPE Cell and the wider LRF, it enabled us to be confident about what was happening and highlighted the issues that we were having, in particular, with FFP3 masks [standard required for face masks in Covid-19 risk control].”* Tim Herbert, LLR Prepared.

59. Working with Trade Unions from the beginning fostered good working relationships and this assisted in quickly responding to the community's need. The nationally agreed working arrangements between employers, the Fire Brigades Union and the NFCC (Tri-partite agreements) ended in some acrimony in January 2021. The local good working relationship meant limited impact from the national acrimony was felt and communities continued to be supported through the multi-agency requests.
60. Pre-existing relationships within the LRF were strengthened and new ones forged, e.g. access to carers who visit homes. Activity was closely coordinated with the multi-agency partners meaning requests were quickly understood and met. Where it was not possible to support requests, officers worked with other partners to find an effective alternative.
61. All work was risk assessed, processes put in place and staff were supported throughout their additional activities.
62. The table below shows the learning identified from the review, details how the Service has improved and the recommendations for future action in similar circumstances.

Learning identified
LFRS played a full and active part in multi-agency response arrangements to the pandemic
Early engagement with Trade Unions was seen as a positive aspect meaning they supported staff working on additional activities for partners
Using other departments / wider in-Service support would have added a more diverse approach to developing solutions to multi-agency partners needs
How has the Service improved?
Strengthened pre-existing relationships with LRF partners
Accessed new contacts within the Care sector to explore further work
Recommendations
Include in future planning arrangements for a small group to 'take stock' at regular intervals of a Major Incident to prevent duplication, frustration and ensure workloads are shared.
Use support departments during future Major Incidents to increase the diverse solutions and include them in supporting the response.

Conclusion

63. Overall, the findings of the review showed that:
- i. Staff were supported and kept safe in the workplace and at home wherever possible. Absence reduced, safety critical training and PPE was provided along with new procedures. 11 weeks of zero Covid-19 cases show that measures were very effective.
 - ii. Preparations for a Major Incident such as a Pandemic were well established and in date. They were continuously updated and reviewed. Supply chains were good and have even been strengthened. Innovative approaches to safely prolong PPE were put in place where replacements could not easily be found.
 - iii. The key priorities of Home Safety Checks and Fires Safety Audits were continued and fire engine appliance availability increased during the period.
 - iv. Supporting Multi-agency partners was swift and positive feedback was received on each occasion. Working with Trade Unions helped in achieving this work without hindrance. There was engagement and attendance at all relevant Multi-agency meeting groups.

Report Implications/Impact

64. Legal (including crime and disorder)

All activity was undertaken within legislative boundaries and supported through LFRS insurers. No identified ongoing legal implications.

65. Financial (including value for money, benefits and efficiencies)

Ensuring lessons identified become lessons learned will mean Business Continuity exercising, for example, may require finances over the next 3-years which requires planning.

66. Risk (including corporate and operational, health and safety and any impact on the continuity of service delivery)

The Pandemic is not over and as such the monitoring and continuous improvement of LFRS planning arrangements will continue to ensure risk is managed effectively.

67. Staff, Service Users and Stakeholders (including the Equality Impact Assessment)

The debrief identified that staff were protected, supported and able to work safely throughout the pandemic response phase. The operational response to the community was unaffected as the Service provided innovative ways of

managing new hazards presented by the pandemic. Partner agencies were supported and provided appropriate advice in a range of additional activities that the Service was asked to support.

68. Environmental

There are no environmental implications from this report.

69. Impact upon Our Plan Objectives

This report identifies good practice observed as well as learning under the following Our Plan objectives:

- i. Effective partnership working – Safer Communities
- ii. Meet our communities' expectations in resolving emergencies – Response
- iii. Reliable, secure and effective ICT systems – Finance and Resources
- iv. Robust and efficient procurement activities – Finance and Resources
- v. The right people, in the right place, doing the right thing, in the right way - People

Background Papers

Report to the CFA 29 July 2020 – Service Update during Covid-19

<https://leics-fire.gov.uk/your-fire-service/decision-making/cfa-meetings/>

Report to the CFA – 16 December 2020 – Covid-19 and Leicestershire Fire and Rescue Service

<https://leics-fire.gov.uk/your-fire-service/decision-making/cfa-meetings/>

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