

REPORT REFERENCE NO.	DSFRA/20/19
MEETING	DEVON & SOMERSET FIRE & RESCUE AUTHORITY
DATE OF MEETING	23 OCTOBER 2020
SUBJECT OF REPORT	RESPONSE OF THE DEVON & SOMERSET FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC
LEAD OFFICER	Chief Fire Officer
RECOMMENDATIONS	<i>That progress from March to date is noted.</i>
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	This report sets out, for information, the key details of the response to date of the Devon & Somerset Fire & Rescue Service to the COVID-19 pandemic.
RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS	Nil.
EQUALITY RISKS AND BENEFITS ANALYSIS	N/A
APPENDICES	A. COVID Mini Integrated Risk Management Plan B. COVID South West Collaboration Report
BACKGROUND PAPERS	Nil.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. 2020 has been a year like no other. The Coronavirus pandemic has changed what and how things are done in society, generally, and for the Devon & Somerset Fire & Rescue Service (“the Service”) specifically. The Authority has received regular briefings (both via e-mails and at previous Members’ Forum meetings) on the Service response to this pandemic. This has included extracts from the COVID Mini Integrated Risk Management Plan which outlines Service performance throughout the pandemic. The full document is shown in Appendix A.
- 1.2. The purpose of this paper is to bring key elements of the Service’s COVID preparedness, response and recovery arrangements together and it should be recognised that much of this has previously been reported to Members of the Fire Authority and to Members of Parliament. It covers the period from April to September and a subsequent paper will report on our arrangements for the next six months.
- 1.3. The Service has increased the extent to which it has used digital ways of communicating and engaging with both staff and the public. This has some clear advantages that it is intended to retain moving forward. Staff have had to adapt to new ways of working, including working from home and they have responded well to the challenges faced. The additional flexibility that this has required provides an opportunity to build on the “People” strand of the Safer Together Programme and maximise the staff contributions.
- 1.4. As society and the Service moved into a full national lockdown, productivity reduced but so did risks faced as businesses were temporarily closed. Through this pandemic, the Service has adjusted and adapted the way it works and continued to focus on those most at risk. The Service is now able to increase productivity again, albeit in a different way and will continue to take a risk-based approach to its prevention, protection and response activities.

2. ASSURANCE

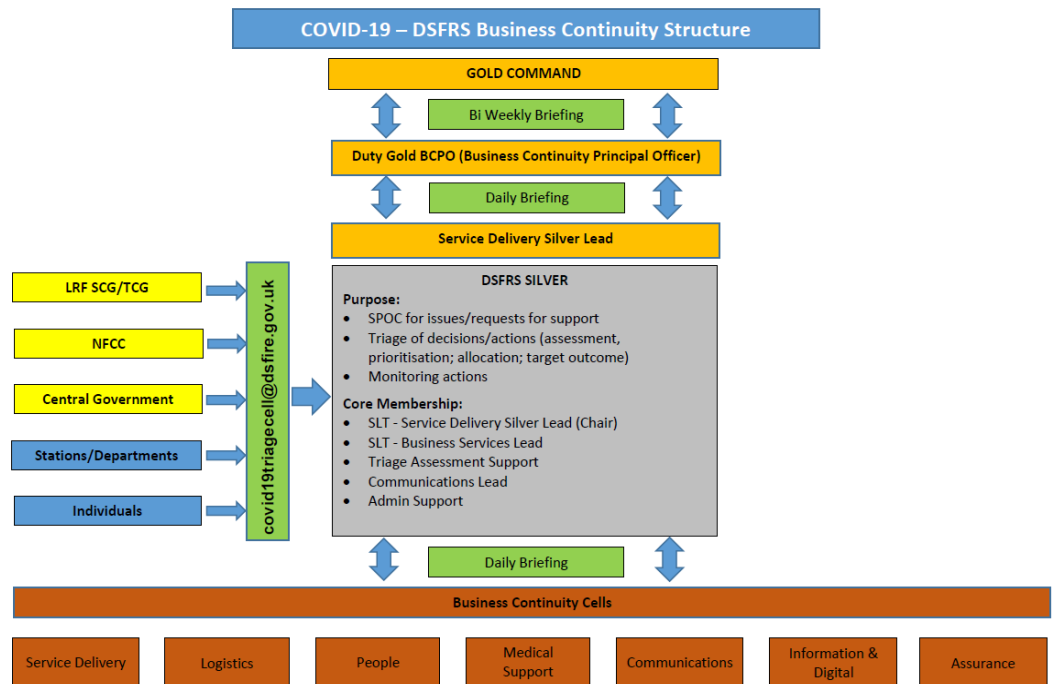
- 2.1. The Service began making arrangements for deploying its business continuity measures in preparation for the COVID-19 pandemic in January and stood up its Critical Response Team on 11 February 2020. Full business continuity measures were deployed on 16 March 2020, following well-rehearsed processes and to support Local Resilience Forums (LRF).
- 2.2. Due to restrictions on travel, office-based staff were asked to work from home and non-essential activity was paused. The Service has seen low levels of absence as a result of COVID-19 and staff absence has not impacted on the ability to maintain core services. Focus was placed on the ability to maintain fire and rescue response activities, which meant that face-to-face prevention and protection activity could not go ahead.

3. STRATEGIC INTENTIONS

3.1. The Service's response and recovery work is guided by the following strategic intentions:

- To proactively protect communities and limit the spread of COVID-19
- To ensure the safety and wellbeing of Service staff in the pursuance of their duties
- To maintain an effective emergency response – the Service will continue to respond to all incidents.
- To maintain essential preparedness activity – the Service will continue to prepare, train and exercise against foreseeable risk with a focus on core competencies.
- To protect communities from fire – the Service will adopt a risk-based approach to protection activity, enforcement action will continue based on a suitable and sufficient risk assessment.
- To prevent the impact of fire and other emergencies on communities – the Service will adopt a risk based approach to prevention - very high risk interventions (Home Safety Checks/Safe and Well Visits) will continue based on a suitable and sufficient risk assessment.
- To maintain essential business services that will ensure effective business continuity, procurement and recovery arrangements are in place throughout the sector.
- To ensure that the sector's response is coordinated and integrated with other responding agencies, promote shared situational awareness and joint understanding of risk.
- To capture and share learning
- To support a return to normality

3.2. To deliver these, the Service established an interim structure. The diagram overleaf (previously provided to the Authority) outlines how the Service arrangements build into the wider partnership approach.



3.3.

Covid-19 BC structure v0.11

old Group. Sets the strategy for the business continuity arrangements and puts appropriate structure in place for their management and oversight.

3.4. **Silver Group.** Service Delivery will be the key focus area for all staff in maintaining the functions of the Fire and Rescue Service for the citizens of Devon and Somerset. This group, chaired by the Service Delivery Silver Lead, provides the primary coordination function for Service wide disruption with a focus on maintaining critical day to day activity and reacting to dynamic changes.

3.5. The Silver Group provides a focal point within the Service for a common situational awareness across the two LRFs and a single point of contact for information and requests coming into the Service, undertaking a triage for decisions and actions. The Silver group will be supported by various 'cells' which will deal with specific matters and will be stood up or down by the Service Delivery Silver Lead as required. The current cells are outlined below.

3.6. **Service Delivery Cell.** This cell plans the future requirements for Service Delivery within the rising tide scenario and subsequent transition into recovery phase provides advice, guidance, information and support to enable critical activities in support of Silver.

- 3.7. **Logistics Cell.** This cell compiles details of staff availability for redeployment and monitors issues with supplies of kit, equipment, materials and consumables ensuring that all physical supplies and goods are provided to Service Delivery through requests and orders placed by both Silver (immediate critical need) and Service Delivery Cell (longer term need).
- 3.8. **People Cell.** This cell oversees the provision of welfare support to staff and advises Silver on policy issues.
- 3.9. **Medical Support Cell.** This cell monitors the current and emerging issues placed upon medical services and identifies opportunities to support medical services and partner agencies.
- 3.10. **Communications Cell.** This cell co-ordinates all communications. It manages all media enquiries and produces a single daily communication to all staff and a weekly briefing for Authority Members.
- 3.11. **Information and Digital Cell.** This Cell provides a single point of contact for all requests from Silver for new reports, Apps or development work related to COVID-19 activities and any work pertaining to information and cyber security.
- 3.12. **Assurance Cell.** This cell monitors, reviews and evaluates the effectiveness of business continuity arrangements and activities and supports the organisational plan for recovery.
- 3.13. The Duty Principal Officer attends the National Fire Chiefs Council weekly meetings where information is shared and good practice disseminated (e.g. operational response to university sites where high incidents of COVID are present).
- 3.14. The Health and Safety Team has provided advice, guidance and support throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been directly attached to support cells formed in response to the pandemic and the Service's needs. The Team was attached to the Medical Cell, People Cell and Recovery Cell, though supported the other cells as necessary. To ensure staff safety and to comply with the 'COVID Secure' requirements numerous guidance documents, bulletins and communications have been developed by the team, and also by others with the support of the Health & Safety Team. There has been 120 risk assessments related to COVID-19 produced, as well as safe systems of work developed which included consideration of individual wellbeing and personal risks from COVID-19 via the Workplace Return Assessment with their line managers.

4. PROTECTION ACTIVITY

- 4.1. Any premises that is legally open should be COVID Secure and have appropriate measures in place to protect people working there and visiting. The government has provided detailed guidance for different kinds of premises which should result in a safer workplace with COVID Secure control measures more consistent from premises to premises and, therefore, enabling physical inspections of premises to take place safely.
- 4.2. The Service is committed to ensuring the health, safety and wellbeing of both its staff and communities, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the situation continues the Service is following government guidance on limiting non-essential contact and, as such, taking a risk-based approach to all protection activity.
- 4.3. The current situation in respect of COVID-19 and the package of measures in place, notably social distancing, have placed challenges on how protection activity can be delivered by the Service.
- 4.4. The Service has looked to national guidance from the National Fire Chief's Council (NFCC) and the Protection activity in other fire and rescue services to develop a revised Protection delivery activity strategy that respects government initiatives to prevent COVID-19 escalation, protects staff, facilitates statutory requirements and continues to deliver protection activity across the Service area.
- 4.5. The Service, in introducing revised protection activity at this time, is conscious that the businesses which fall under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (the Order) are all operating in an uncertain and unprecedented environment of demand and restrictions. The Protection activity strikes an appropriate balance of ensuring businesses are safe and compliant with the Order, whilst also understanding that these are exceptionally challenging operating conditions for all.
- 4.6. The protection activity takes a pragmatic view based upon balancing fire safety outcomes, legislation requirements and government COVID-19 operating models.
- 4.7. The initial Service response was to safeguard the welfare of its employees and in accordance with UK Government advice via Public Health England and the NFCC, the Service paused its proactive Risk Based Inspection Programme and with many businesses closed during that particular time, the corresponding risk reduced.
- 4.8. Throughout this time the Service has maintained its re-active fire safety protection arrangements for issuing Prohibition Notices. Protection delivery staff have also been pro-actively supporting healthcare premises through nominated 'points of contact'. Response has been positive from the healthcare sector for our support to them in dealing with the new and emerging challenges they face from their COVID-19 provisions.

- 4.9. As a result of the positive outcomes from Service support to the healthcare sector and in consultation and co-ordination with other fire and rescue services in the Southwest and also the Care Quality Commission (CQC), protection delivery introduced pro-active remote compliance support to other 'High Risk' sectors in the form of 'Business Support Calls'. This was identified as Stage One of the recovery process and started with Healthcare NHS and Care Homes via telephone and video calls.
- 4.10. Normal protection activity has resumed wherever possible and safe to do so. The table below outlines the range and extent of engagement undertaken.

Table 1 Protection Activity

Activity	Total
Follow Up Business Support Call	1
Follow Up Alterations Notice	1
Desktop Fire Safety Audit	29
Fire Safety Check Professional Judgement	6
ORIS 3 Inspection	25
Safety Advisory Group - Other Venues	58
Built Environment Information	166
Heritage Consultation or Activity	1
Compliance Visit	2
Education Consultation - FSO	1
Fire Safety Order Not Applicable	2
Follow Up Prohibition Notice	12
Unwanted Fire Signals Advice	120
Fire Engineering Consultation	9
Licensing Consultation - FSO	281
Pre-Consultation - Non FSO	33
Specific Communication	247
Follow Up Action Plan	42
Follow Up Enforcement Notice	44
Prosecution	3
Safety Advisory Group - Sports Grounds	13
Compliance Event	1
Other FSO Consultation	486
Fire Safety Audit	61
Business Support Call	561
Follow Up Fire Safety Check	7
Specific Complaint	39
Fire Safety Check	216
Fire Safety Check Not Completed	14
Follow Up Building Regulations	365
Follow Up Notification of Deficiencies	4
Building Regulations Consultation	543

Activity	Total
Housing Consultation - FSO	42

5. PREVENTION ACTIVITY

- 5.1. Person to person community engagement has been significantly reduced due to the restrictions around COVID-19. All career fairs, cadet meetings, school visits, open days, 'Have a go' days, bike courses and many other activities, apart from virtual engagement, were ceased. However, partner collaboration and engagement in different areas, to support the community to cope with the unprecedented situation, were agreed and undertaken.
- 5.2. The Service continued to run a number of campaigns to increase awareness and influence behaviours.

Table 2 Summary of external campaigns

Bonfire & BBQ safety	April
My Red Thumb Day – Road Safety	May
Water Safety & Cold Water Shock	May
Camping/ Caravan/ Tent Fire Safety	July
Wildfire Prevention	May
Vehicle fires	July
'It's the little things ...' – vehicle fire, wildfire, BBQ	July/August/ September
Chimney safety	September/October
Thatch property safety	September/October

- 5.3. Whilst COVID 19 has massively impacted the ability of the Home Safety Visit technicians to deliver their usual high number of household visits, the prevention team has nevertheless been extremely busy helping to keep people safe in their homes. Since the Service went into Business Continuity Planning (BCP) arrangements on 17 March, Home Safety Visits have only been carried out by a Technician in the following circumstances:

- Where a significant high risk of fire has been identified by a referring partner agency or concerned relative/ friend and the property has NO working smoke detection installed.
- Where a threat of arson has been made to a person or property and the Service has received a Police referral, the Service will visit to fit smoke detection and an arson letter box blocker.
- To replace a bleeping alarm.
- The Home Safety Technicians have completed **1677 Home Safety Visits** since the Service commenced its recovery phase on 3 August. The Home Safety Administration team has also conducted **2149 Eligibility Assessments** with customers.

5.4. The Service has been delivering the Home Safety Visits/replacement alarms and arson letter box blockers that meet its BCP criteria. During COVID BCP and Recovery the Service provided 6258 pieces of equipment to vulnerable customers.

- Smoke Alarms 3,923
- Hard of Hearing Sets 717
- C O Alarms 1,004
- Extension Leads 291
- Flaplock Restrictors 88
- Fire Retardant bedding sets 99
- Fire Retardant Throws 86
- Lap Blankets 50

5.5. The Fire Kills team has also been trained as Auxiliary Fire Control Operators to provide resilience in the Control room if needed, and now regularly trains with fire control staff to maintain skills.

6. OPERATIONAL RISK REDUCTION

6.1. At the same time, the Service continues to undertake operational risk visits.

6.2. Prior to lockdown, a temporary layer of information was added to the Mobile Data Terminals (MDTs). The COVID 19 information replaced the work for the Operational Risk Information (ORI) team immediately with an influx of creditable information from other agencies from a mixture of meetings including Somerset Multi-Agency Tactical, Local Resilience Forums (LRFs). This assisted in advising response crews of COVID 19 sites.

Table 3 Operational Risk Visits

Level 1 Operational Risk inspections	1080 (All telephone)
Level 3 Site Specific Risk inspections (SSRIs)	157 (of which 48 have been face to face)
Temporary COVID 19 Sites	17 face to face visits during lockdown inspecting Level 3 SSRIs on crematoriums, Temporary (T) hospitals, T/ body storage units & T/mortuaries)

7. RESPONSE ACTIVITY

7.1. Weekly updates on the impact of the pandemic on the risk profile of communities across Devon and Somerset along with the availability of appliances and performance against emergency response standards have been provided and relevant data highlighted by updates to the Authority.

- 7.2. Total incidents from 01 April 2020 – 30 September 2020: 7452
- 2977 false alarms attended (as forecasted).
 - 2186 fires attended (9% below forecast) which includes 434 primary dwelling fires (7% below forecast).
 - 2289 special service calls attended (34% below forecast) which includes 298 Road Traffic Collisions (40% below forecast).
- 7.3. In addition, as part of the South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trusts (SWAST) continued response to COVID-19, a 'combined crewed' fleet of 15 Ambulances has been deployed in partnership with Cornwall, Devon and Somerset, Dorset and Wiltshire, Avon and Gloucestershire fire and rescue services. These vehicles are crewed by one firefighter and one SWAST emergency care assistant. The Service is the lead fire and rescue service to allow for clear lines of communication and a consistent approach to this project.
- 7.4. In the first phase of the pandemic, the Service provided staff to drive ambulances to 2,648 calls and saved countless lives in the process. The Service is currently gearing up to provide support to the Ambulance Trust for the second phase of the pandemic and this will commence on 1 November 2020 and run until the beginning of March 2021. More details are shown in the collaboration summary in Annex B.

8. **PEOPLE**

(Note: The following information is extracted from report HRMDC/20/2 [People Strategy Update] to the meeting of the [Human Resources Management & Development Committee](#) held on 21 October 2020).

- 8.1. An engagement framework has been developed which sets out how the Service will engage with its staff, partners and communities. The framework sits under the Communication and Engagement Strategy and aims to bring all the engagement activity happening across the Service together under a set of principles and practices so that benefits from interactions with various stakeholder groups are maximised. Use of Facebook Workplace and virtual meetings by the Service has increased during the COVID-19 Response phase and there are plans to develop a range of ongoing engagement mechanisms for different staff groups. This will help for better two-way communication across the workforce and aid important conversations so that staff have more opportunities to share their thoughts and ideas on key issues.
- 8.2. Following a suggestion from station, the Service's Values icons were redesigned to reflect how the Service lives by these values and looks after the health, safety and wellbeing of communities and its staff throughout the Pandemic.

- 8.3. For support staff, the Service is seeking to create more flexible ways of working under smart working principles. During the Response phase of the Pandemic, the Service was able to accelerate its aspirations for more flexible working with a change to core hours along with working from home for all those without an essential need to be in the workplace. Many teams reported working from home to be more family friendly and flexible. Staff felt they have been more productive and task focused. Meetings with line managers, whilst via video or phone, are more regular and more focused. Many staff have been able to reduce or remove travelling time. Work wear can be more relaxed at home particularly in the hot weather that was experienced during the lockdown period.
- 8.4. However, there is no effective substitute in some cases for face-to-face engagement and the Service has had to change some of its established collaborative ways of working, such as workshops, to a more limited approach until it is safe to resume face-to-face interaction. Teams generally feel a blended approach to flexible working is preferable, as the benefits of social interaction are essential for a healthy workplace culture, and to support mental health and wellbeing. The Service is taking this opportunity, whilst the culture is shifting, to scope out a smart working vision with staff together with the physical, technical and cultural requirements associated with this. The Service will then move towards a new working model that will provide both ongoing resilience in business continuity and meet the aspirations set out in the people strategy.
- 8.5. In the COVID-19 Response phase, People Impact Assessment (PIA) considerations have been captured, and action plans to support the health and wellbeing of staff implemented via:
- COVID-19 Business Continuity Response People Impact Assessment (staff);
 - Desktop research into pandemic behaviour, the impacts of lockdown, the likely UK recovery plan and the needs of people in a Recovery phase;
 - A Recovery PIA workshop conducted with the People Cell (subject matter experts), the Recovery Lead and the Business Continuity manager;
 - One-to-one interviews with key stakeholders;
 - COVID-19 staff survey to test the temperature on a range of issues affecting staff;
 - Gathering information on team impacts across the service in terms of their health and wellbeing; and
 - Specific work with On-call staff to identify issues and ensure they have access to wellbeing.

- 8.6. This information has supported the Service in developing, for example: online access to wellbeing support, wide ranging guidance for managers and staff on remote working and in developing a process for staff to assess and discuss their individual risk levels using a COVID-19 Age risk calculator before they partially return to the workplace as part of one of the later Recovery phases. Staff who have been in the workplace throughout the Response phase are similarly encouraged to assess their risk using the COVID-19 Age risk calculator and to discuss this with their line manager in a health and wellbeing conversation should they have any concerns. Staff who have identified in higher risk groups are referred to Occupational Health for clinically assessed arrangements to be made.

9. FINANCE

(Note: The following information is extracted from reports to the meeting of the [Resources Committee](#) held on 2 July 2020).

- 9.1. The Coronavirus pandemic has increased uncertainty over funding available to all public services, with the likely impact on the long-term economy unknown. It is therefore even more important that scenario planning informs financial plans for the Authority. A sustained economic downturn is likely to introduce the risk that households and business will struggle to pay their council tax and business rates bills, restricting the funding available to local services. Government grants of £1.6m have been received to fund the Coronavirus response and this will enable maintenance of operational capability and support business continuity activity.

10. KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

- 10.1. In the first phase of the pandemic, the Service provided staff to drive ambulances to 2,648 calls and saved countless lives in the process. The Service is currently gearing up to provide support to the Ambulance Trust for the second phase of the pandemic and this will commence on 1 November 2020 and run until the beginning of March 2021. More details are shown in the collaboration summary in Annex B.
- 10.2. Whilst the Chief Fire Officer has acted as the coordinator for this work on behalf of the five Fire and Rescue Services in the region, the commitment from other Fire and Rescue Services has been superb and it is worthy of note that the five Chief Fire Officers are working better together than ever before. Not only has this eased some implementation work for the Ambulance Service but it has also improved cross border working/awareness in general which will directly address one of HMICFRS recommendations.

- 10.3. The Service seconded an Assistant Chief Fire Officer to support a Local Authority cell as part of the Local Resilience Forum. This is the group of organisations who would respond to a major incident including local authority's, emergency services, utility companies, representatives from central government and others. This provided additional capacity and skills at a time when there was much to do and significant logistic support required to ensure essential suppliers were delivered to where needed most.
- 10.4. The Service has remained an active and supportive member at the Strategic Coordination Groups (the emergency response for the Local Resilience Fora) in both Devon and Cornwall and Avon and Somerset. In addition, the Chief Fire Officer has been invited to represent the five Fire and Rescue Services at the Regional Coordination Group which is also meeting weekly. Through this mechanism, requests for assistance and offers of support are made.
- 10.5. Service sickness levels have been the lowest for some time which provides some reassurance that the arrangements to protect staff have been effective. Like every other organisation, however, whilst the Service now has 'COVID secure' sites, the human behaviour of staff is the key determining factor and government guidance continues to be reinforced through various communication channels.
- 10.6. The Service is currently in the second wave of this pandemic and will continue to evolve its approach and strike a balance between continuing to deliver the high quality services that the public rightly expect with its responsibility to protect its staff. Since April 2020, whilst within COVID-19, the Service has seen an excellent performance. Service sickness level performance is 17% better than it was at this same period in 2019/20.
- 10.7. Despite the obvious restrictions that COVID has presented, Service Prevention Protection and Response activity has continued, albeit in a different way in many areas. At the same time, the Service continues to evolve and plans to increase activity in the weeks ahead, given that the pandemic is forecasted to continue for some time.
- 10.8. Forecasting future demand (reasonable worst case scenario for COVID) and the associated impact on the Service in the event that there is a significant loss of staff, continues to be modelled and plans to deliver an effective level of service will continue to be reviewed on a regular basis to reflect emerging evidence, trends and restrictions.

LEE HOWELL
Chief Fire Officer