

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council

6 October 2020

West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority

Report by Councillor John Edwards

On 18th March West Midlands Fire Service formally implemented business continuity arrangements in response to the COVID19 and in preparation of the announcement of a Major Incident across the West Midlands Conurbation.

A major incident was declared on the 20th March by West Midlands Police. The Strategic Enabling Team (SET) 'stood up' as the Business Continuity Management Team (BCMT), broadly based on the National Fire Chief Council (NFCC) 'Fire-Gold' structure which had been implemented to coordinate sector wide information in response to C19. The Business Continuity Management Team continues to operate to the following strategic outcomes during this business continuity period:

1. Maximise the continuity of critical activities delivered to the most vulnerable across the West Midlands
2. Support and inform the health and wellbeing of our staff
3. Be a responsive partner across the Public Sector to protect vital services to our communities and proactively limit the spread of COVID 19
4. Return to 'normal' with a healthy workforce while moving towards business as usual through a recovery process. The Service maintains a flexible and agile approach to business continuity management and its achievement of the above objectives.

Delivery of core services:

Prevention, Protection, Response Prevention services which involve direct engagement with communities have been fully risk assessed to ensure the safety of our communities and staff. As the COVID alert level moved from 5 to 3 and the Service continued to operate with established COVID guidance and responding effectively to changes within this, the delivery of prevention and protection services were adapted to enable a digital approach to their delivery and a continued focus on delivering to high risk/vulnerable individuals and communities.

Prevention face to face Safe and Well visits are focused on the highly vulnerable and Protection Fire Safety on-site inspections on those businesses which present life risk.

'Response' incidents have continued overall to be below the three-year average, although these are increasing and aligning to the three-year average as government measures have lifted. The Service continues to respond to all incidents with a heightened awareness of contact with the public forming part of the risk assessment. ***There has been no detrimental impact on appliance availability and average response times to incidents of 4-minutes 30-seconds have been maintained through this period.***

The current move to COVID alert level 4 is being reviewed at this point against these core services to assess organisational impact and how services will need to be adapted again to ensure we can continue to deliver value to our communities whilst operating within government guidance and keeping staff and communities safe.

During the COVID pandemic there has been an increase in anti-social behaviour directed toward some of its staff and within the communities they serve. There have been 62 attacks on firefighters since the 23rd March, these include verbal and physical attacks.

The Authority has sought to increase awareness of this kind of behaviour through social and general media. It has expressed determination to pursue further action, where appropriate, within the legal frameworks available.

There have also been increases of anti-social behaviour and abuse within communities themselves. This has resulted in heightened levels of Prevention activity for the Service, predominantly the fitting of letter box protectors.

New Activities:

The Service has been in the forefront of the National Fire Chief Council's response to the pandemic. On 24th March 2020 a Tripartite Agreement was reached between the National Joint Council (Employers group), National Fire Chiefs Council (Fire Officers group) and the Fire Brigades' Union on principles to be followed to enable all Fire and Rescue Services (FRS) to provide a range of additional activities to support the response to tackling the Covid-19 pandemic. This agreement has developed since its inception adding additional areas of activity and was in place until 13 September 2020. A further extension of this timeline is currently in discussion.

WMFS adopted an approach of requesting volunteers from existing members of staff to undertake any new activities agreed and requested locally. An excellent response saw over 800 staff volunteering to support all new activities. Requests for WMFS support primarily came via the Local Resilience Forum (LRF), Strategic Coordination Group (SCG) and through partners across local Authorities. All requests were considered and consulted on locally with all Representative Bodies and the highest standards of risk assessment of health and safety have been provided.

The main areas of support provided by WMFS through additional activities are:

The delivery of essential items including food, medication and 'no contact letters' on behalf of local authorities and partners. Operating through six delivery hubs spread across the West Midlands, by 31st August a total of 7101 deliveries had been made with including 4380 food parcels, 413 medical supplies and 2366 no-contact letters

The operation of COVID – 19 Body Movement took place through volunteers to provide support to local Coroners and funeral directors as part of a Pandemic Multi Agency Response Team (PMART) alongside West Midlands Ambulance Service (WMAS) and West Midlands Police staff. The PMART provided support across the full 24-hour period ensuring that any people who had sadly passed away due to COVID 19 were removed from their location in a timely manner and above all with dignity and respect. This service was stood down on the 18.05.2020. Arrangements are in place to reform the WMFS team if necessary, within 48 hours' notice and a structured debrief took place to ensure learning can be understood from this activity.

As the COVID alert levels reduced and government guidance for those highly vulnerable individuals to shield have relaxed, there is now a reducing demand for these additional services. Some services are reducing or being wound down, however there continues to be a small number of requests for support for vulnerable children and adults over the summer period. The provision of these activities demonstrates the wider community benefits that WMFS have added outside of their traditional core business, and the whole organisation remains ready, willing and able to provide further support as needed.

As the COVID alert level has now increased to 4, the service will begin to put in place arrangements to support the delivery of additional activities should this activity be required as requested through the Strategic Co-ordination Group and LRF.

New activities evaluation:

A survey circulated to all partners who we have supported with essential deliveries, as well as some partners who made initial enquiries found that of the 9 partners who responded so far, 5 gave a 5 star rating for overall performance. The average rating was 4.1 stars, and no partner scored us lower than 3 stars (defined as “performance as expected”). Overall, the feedback was extremely positive.

Financial Summary

Two Separate COVID related funding allocations amounting to £2.786M have been made by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to the Authority. The first, issued on 20th March 2020 was for £0.594M and the second, issued on 28th April 2020 was for £2.192M. COVID related expenditure incurred up to the end of August amounted to circa £1.5M.

Fire Authority arrangements

West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority has continued to operate within the aegis of the Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Meetings) Regulations 2020. The Authority has been digitally enabled by the Service to meet and receive a briefing from Statutory Officers on a fortnightly basis and these arrangements ended on the 30th August 2020.

Authority Committees from 20th March to 30th August were cancelled and decisions postponed. This is except for Audit and Risk Committees which have taken place digitally during June and July.

Regular virtual Authority briefings were in place throughout the pandemic focusing upon the business continuity management arrangements for the Service, providing an overview of how business continuity objectives are being achieved, any significant risks to achieving these, the status of the capacity of the Service Delivery Model to fulfil the legal obligations and priorities of the Authority and the Service. This approach has proven to be very successful and receives continued positive feedback from Authority Members.

The commencement of Authority meetings is planned for 5th October although monthly Authority briefings are now in place. All meetings are currently planned to take place digitally. These will cover both business continuity as well as the continuation of Fire Authority business.

Where decisions were required and could not be postponed, were considered under the Constitution's Standing Order, 17.1 'Urgent Matters', which provides the Chief Fire Officer with the delegation to make urgent decisions in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Authority. This approach to Fire Authority arrangements was reviewed every 30 days between officers and Members to ensure appropriateness considering committee work programmes, areas requiring decision and the capacity of Members and Officers to support their WMFS OFFICIAL Low WMFRA COVID S41 Brief 27 July 2020 provision. Use of the 'Urgent Matters' framework has occurred on two occasions since 18th March 2020.

Performance figures – Year to date:

Performance Indicator	Actual 2019-20	Target to end of Aug-20	Actual to end of Aug-20
The number of accidental fires in dwellings	1,600	701	698
The number of injuries from accidental fires in dwellings	51	20	16
The number of deliberate fires in dwellings	206	95	73
The number of accidental fires in non-domestic premises	435	185	139
The number of deliberate fires in non-domestic premises	130	66	58
The number of deliberate vehicle fires	694	333	252
The number of deliberate rubbish fires	1,515	857	611
The number of malicious false alarms calls received	440	N/A	164
The number of false alarm calls due to automatic fire alarms	5,925	2,426	2,410
Number led to safety from fires with brigade assistance	251	N/A	134
Number of rescues from fires	148	N/A	169
Number of RTCs attended	2,758	N/A	909
Number of extrications from RTCs	251	N/A	66

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