



Covid-19 response: fire services 'Ready, Willing and Able'

National Fire Chiefs Council Chair Roy Wilsher reports on the additional work fire and rescue services are undertaking supporting the response to the pandemic



The current Covid-19 pandemic has changed the world we currently live in; it would have been almost unimaginable at the start of the year to predict the situation we now find ourselves in. I do not recall any of the many pandemic exercises I have been involved in over the years having an inject that included lockdown.

The work carried out by the National Fire Chiefs Council has happened at pace and

continues to do so. By working closely with the Home Office and other government departments, the unions and employers, we are ensuring a single professional voice. NFCC has led on PPE procurement, communication, testing and the production of national guidance across service delivery areas to support fire services and reduce pressure locally.

We have had virtual daily meetings with the Home Office to ensure they are aware of the wide

range of work underway and NFCC is influencing what services need from national government to assist their delivery.

NFCC has also been working tirelessly with government to ensure fair funding for fire services, and I am pleased to see the recent allocations announced by the Local Government Secretary Robert Jenrick MP. This should go some way in reducing pressure on already stretched services. We will continue to assess this.

Fire and rescue services across England are set to receive an additional £48 million in government funding to support their response to Covid-19.

This is part of the £1.6 billion funding announced on April 18, which is in addition to the first tranche of funding announced on March 19, which also stood at 1.6 billion.

New guidance is being produced every day; and we are now in the process of ensuring it is constantly kept up to date via our dedicated NFCC COVID Gold group. This in itself is a mammoth task but vital to ensure fire services have access to positions, guidance and information which they can have absolute faith in and adapt for local needs.

The way all fire and rescue services have adapted to the pressures of Covid-19 has been second to none. This is what the FRS does best; ensuring those who need help, receive help.



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The role of fire services has been evolving on a daily basis, sometimes every few hours. Following in-depth discussions between NFCC, the National Employer and the Fire Brigades Union we have arrived at a number of additional activities, the first agreement being made towards the end of March. The six circulars are valuable enablers to allow adoption or adaptation to meet local needs; they are not instructions to each FRS.

While these discussions have often been positive, there have also been some in-depth negotiations, but we have now secured these agreements and I hope these relationships continue in this vein in the future. We have also had constructive discussions with other trade unions such as FOA and the FRSA.

The movement of bodies, driving ambulances and assisting vulnerable people, transporting patients to and from Nightingale Hospitals, face shield assembly and packing, assisting with antigen testing, ambulance transport, driver training and instruction, assisting with face fit



fireKnowledge

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and delivery of PPE and medicines are areas of work now being carried out.

We estimate 4,000 members of staff from all parts of our fire and rescue services have volunteered to undertake these additional duties, with an additional 10,000 on standby, which gives an idea of the sheer size of the response being undertaken. This is testament that firefighters and other Fire Service staff across the UK are Ready, Willing and Able to take on additional work, supporting the response to the current Covid-19 pandemic. The wellbeing of staff remains paramount and this is being carefully monitored as people are undertaking work they would not usually be doing, in often highly stressful and emotive situations.

This is in addition to maintaining the delivery of core duties; it is clear to see the dedication and commitment. The Fire Service has stepped up and is carrying out this work professionally, with the community at the heart of their response. This ‘can do’ ethic and the use of our existing skills, competence and capability is second to none.

To support this, we launched our #ReadyWillingAble campaign, to showcase all the work fire and rescue services are carrying out during the pandemic. It is important to me that all staff know how important they are and that they are recognised for the additional activities currently underway.

Alongside the response to Covid-19, other work is continuing. The government has said the removal of dangerous cladding needs to happen and with people currently spending more times

in their homes, it is imperative that this work takes place with the relevant safety measures in place. We have updated our ‘Waking Watch’ guidance to reflect the current situation, which we hope will go some way to help people feel safer, but it is imperative that the removal of cladding continues.

We have seen the second reading of the Fire Safety Bill, which should provide further clarity on a number of areas; this remains of paramount importance, especially with the unprecedented challenges we are currently facing. It is essential that buildings are safe as this is absolutely critical to public safety.

While it looks like we are seeing some improvements in the UK and planning assumptions are starting to change as we adapt to the changing situation, the ‘new’ business as usual is unlikely to see fire and rescue services returning to pre-Covid activities for some time. NFCC have started to plan for the new normal, how we move into wider protection and prevention work, how workplaces might ease out of lockdown and prepare for any second phase. We also aim to learn from the response and feed into our programme and project work, as we have with the Grenfell and Inspectorate recommendations, to adapt and not kneejerk into a change of direction.

I would like to give my thanks to all fire and rescue staff for the work which is being carried out during these difficult times. Rest assured, NFCC will continue its work to ensure fire and rescue services get the best possible support and recognition for its outstanding effort into the Covid-19 response.

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