

ETAP review of Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service's (FARS) response to the Covid pandemic: Workforce welfare and wellbeing.

What did we review and why is this important?

Staffordshire FARS has had to balance potentially conflicting aims during the Covid pandemic, continuing to provide a public service for the people of Staffordshire and looking after the welfare of firefighters and other staff. We wanted to understand the measures that Staffordshire FARS had put in place to support the physical and mental health of its workforce.

How did we go about the review?

We read the Staffordshire-specific report produced by the inspectorate, HMICFRS. We read two documents provided to us by Becci Bryant, Chief Fire Officer, the *Business continuity plan* and *Working safely during the coronavirus outbreak – people guidance*. Rob Barber, Deputy Chief Fire Officer and Rich Williams, Group Manager, gave us a presentation to tell us what Staffordshire FARS had done to support workforce welfare and wellbeing. We also prepared a series of questions which were discussed during the session with Rob and Rich.

What did we find?

We found that Staffordshire FARS:

- Was able to quickly put into place a Covid business continuity plan (Mar-20). FARS was, in part, able to do this so quickly due to existing continuity plans focussing on potential loss of staff, such as a plan previously developed to tackle avian flu.
- For staff onboarding and training, grouped firefighters into “cohorts” to help limit wide cross-interaction. Provisioned for additional changing facilities. Reduced classroom sizes from 16 to 8.
- Quickly ensured appropriate PPE was made available for firefighters who must work in teams.
- Monitored absence every day to identify where people needed more support. Found a slight increase in absence. All staff were very cautious even with minor ailments, especially earlier in the pandemic.
- Utilised on-call firefighters where regular firefighters were away from work due to absence. This helped to limit the operational impact of absences.
- Introduced a clear policy and procedure entitled *Working safely during the coronavirus outbreak – people guidance*, including how to record absence. Absence due to Covid was treated differently to normal absence, whereby isolation absence is not counted towards any management intervention. So, there was no fear amongst staff in taking time away from work and therefore limiting risk of infection whilst also helping to reduce staff stress levels.
- Introduced reporting for homeworking staff who had symptoms / self-isolation periods even if they were able to continue working as normal, where it would be recorded as “COVID Household Isolating”.
- Saw psychological absence overtake physiological absence during the pandemic. In response, there was improved occupational health support provision including getting access to and promoting the *Wellbeing College*.
- Has now (as at Jun-21) seen absence levels stabilise back to “normal” levels.
- Senior managers gave talks and presentations on wellbeing, alongside other updates through a variety of communication channels.

- Introduced an occupational health “Covid hotline”.
- Early on, introduced twice-a-week lateral flow testing for all staff. Operational staff in daily close contact had to take daily lateral flow tests.
- For non-firefighter staff who had to work from home, risk assessments were carried out on their workspaces. Where possible, FARS provided equipment from the office to create a better homeworking environment, such as allowing staff to take chairs from the office to their home.
- Encouraged all staff to take their annual leave. Despite limited opportunity for people to go on holiday due to the pandemic, it was felt that staff needed to take breaks for their own welfare. No special provision was made for increasing annual leave carryover.
- As part of their involvement in Staffordshire’s Strategic Coordination Group (SCG) and Tactical Coordination Group (TCG), FARS supported the wider Staffordshire response to Covid through actions such as;
 - Supporting the community through delivery of food parcels
 - PPE delivery
 - Ambulance driving; movement of patients
 - Mortuary arrangements

What comments/questions do we have?

We have reviewed a lot of evidence that tells us how Staffordshire FARS was proactive and focused on delivering its duty of care towards its people. It showed leadership at all levels and senior leadership rose to the challenges.

It would be helpful to have some follow-up information on:

- a) While staff forced to homework were given access to office equipment, e.g. office chairs, we were unclear on what IT equipment was provided, or if additional IT equipment needed to be purchased such as laptops and/or upgrades to the network servers / virtual private network (VPN)?
- b) It was unclear what impact upon productivity had occurred, particularly amongst those who were forced to homework.
- c) Regarding psychological overtaking physiological absence for the first time, clarity is needed whether this was amongst firefighters, support/office staff, or both? And with staff absence levels now back to normal levels, has this split remained and therefore can this shift be attributable solely to the Covid pandemic?
- d) It was noted that Staffordshire FARS does not conduct staff surveys, instead choosing to engage in different ways such as senior management touring stations and regular email communications. Surveys are a popular method of gauging staff sentiment across both the private and public sector, and importantly offer a means by which to formally capture this sentiment. This is especially important during the Covid pandemic. While we acknowledge the merit in Staffordshire FARS approach to staff engagement, how is it ensured that common and/or repeated issues raised by staff are both recorded and actioned?
- e) We were unclear on what communication streams were in place beyond senior management / management briefings, e.g. centralised email comms.

Our additional questions:

1. What are Staffordshire FARS plans for homeworking staff moving forward, e.g. back to the office full-time, a “hybrid” approach?
2. As Staffordshire FARS was able to support the SCG and TCG through its various support actions noted in this report, does this mean that due to the Covid pandemic demand on the service from the public was reduced enabling FARS to offer this support, or was this in addition to normal demand and if so did this extra work impact upon morale?
3. How and when will FARS reflect on its handling of communications about wellbeing to learn for the future?
4. What policies is FARS putting in place to provide continuing support for people affected by Long-Covid?
5. Is FARS going to continue its focus on staff wellbeing post-pandemic, and if so by what means?
6. In the HMICFRS report it was noted that a review of the flexible working policy was underway; how is this progressing, and what are the expected outcomes?
7. Are there any plans to carry out “lessons learnt” sessions, particularly with the Force and Commissioner’s office to share best practice?

Jane King & Craig Brown, ETAP, with thanks to Becci Bryant, Rob Barber and Rich Williams for their input and the documentation provided to support our understanding and ability to frame questions.

Response

- a) The service purchased a number of additional laptops for personnel and ensured that the appropriate workstations were assessed from a health and safety perspective.
- b) The culture within the Service is one based upon Trust and although we have monitoring software we chose not as this would go against our ethos of trusting our personnel to do the right thing. Performance is scrutinised through various channels and this continued throughout the pandemic with no discernible drop in outputs.
- c) The absence rates were across the workforce and the support that was put into place covered all workforce groups and the absence figures are managed through the performance assurance board on a regular basis with trends being identified in all groups.
- d) We have just completed 146 sessions with all staff in order to gain ground truth of how people are feeling; we see this as far more appropriate than sending out a questionnaire and we have had a far more detailed response which will allow us to develop new approaches. In addition, we are currently developing a suite of options available to personnel whereby they can raise issues in a confidential manner that then gets fed back to the Service which we see as a more valuable approach to staff engagement.
- e) We have a weekly staff newsletter that all personnel have access to in addition we do regular video communications or VLOGS from a variety of sources which are all in addition to the intranet and quarterly magazine.

Answers to additional questions:

1. What are Staffordshire FARS plans for homeworking staff moving forward, e.g. back to the office full-time, a “hybrid” approach?

This will continue and our flexible working policy is now published with people accessing the various options available thus creating a blended approach to work depending upon individual requirements.

2. As Staffordshire FARS was able to support the SCG and TCG through its various support actions noted in this report, does this mean that due to the Covid pandemic demand on the service from the public was reduced enabling FARS to offer this support, or was this in addition to normal demand and if so did this extra work impact upon morale?

There was no doubt that the COVID demand was in addition to the normal work and yes on occasions this created an impact upon morale, however in the majority of cases this was a positive impact as our personnel could easily see the community benefit that they were adding to.

3. How and when will FARS reflect on its handling of communications about wellbeing to learn for the future?

We can always improve upon communications and although we did well I think that we need to consider the widest possible set of communications channels in order to reach as many as possible.

4. What policies is FARS putting in place to provide continuing support for people affected by Long-Covid?

We have occupational health as well as the employee assistance programme, Fire Fighters Charity, and other organisations that we can refer people into for professional support.

5. Is FARS going to continue its focus on staff wellbeing post-pandemic, and if so by what means?

Staff wellbeing is at the forefront of our approach and always will be, we will no doubt learn a great deal from the pandemic that will further develop this area.

6. In the HMICFRS report it was noted that a review of the flexible working policy was underway; how is this progressing, and what are the expected outcomes?

This is now in place and will provide opportunities for our personnel to work in a more flexible manner which supports a health work life balance.

7. Are there any plans to carry out “lessons learnt” sessions, particularly with the Force and Commissioner’s office to share best practice?

The lessons learned are being discussed with the Office and we have held a number of debrief sessions in order for the Service to take all of the learning from this experience.

Follow-up actions

Report to ETAP as part of ongoing regular governance reporting

ETAP team

ETAP members Craig Brown and Jane King worked on this review. Thanks to Rob Barber and Rich Williams of FARS for their input.