

Response to the CoVID-19 Pandemic

Reference number: EPFCP/10/20

Report title: Response to the CoVID-19 Pandemic	
Report to: Essex Police, Fire and Crime Panel	
Report author: The Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Essex	
Date: 4 June 2020	For: Noting and comment
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County Divisions affected: All Essex	

1. Purpose of Report

This report provides an overview of the response to the CoVID-19 pandemic by the PFCC, Essex Police and the Essex County Fire and Rescue Service.

2. Recommendations

This information is for the Panel to note.

3. Context / Summary

3.1 The Essex Resilience Forum (ERF)

The Essex Resilience Forum (ERF) is a multi-agency partnership made up of local councils, emergency services, health providers, the voluntary sector and many more organisations working together to plan, prepare for and manage a multi-agency response to a major incident or emergency. The reason this partnership exists and we plan for these large scale events is due to the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, which came into effect in order to ensure that the UK is better prepared to cope with the risks that it faces.

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Essex Resilience Forum stood up a Strategic Coordinating Group (SCG). The SCG was put into action to provide coordination and alignment across member services in Essex. The SCG is jointly chaired by Chief Constable BJ Harrington and Deputy Chief Fire Officer, Rick Hylton. The two Chairs rotate responsibility to provide resilience. The purpose of the SCG is to:

- Minimise the risk to the public by assisting Public Health to contain the spread of the virus and to support the contact tracing.
- Maximise, where practicable, the safety of staff and partners by providing advice and appropriate PPE where necessary.

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- Ensure business continuity plans are in place to enable the provision of key services and continued delivery of essential services to the public.
- To reassure the public by supporting Public Health guidance and Public Health messages.
- To ensure that any community tensions and intelligence / information are effectively managed through the strategic co-ordinating group and existing structures.
- To support Local Resilience Forum partner agencies and local communities to mitigate the impacts of the virus.
- To ensure a coordinated approach to any arrivals to the UK (by air or sea) of persons who pose a Public Health risk arising from Covid-19.
- To promote a return to business as usual and restoration of disrupted services at the earliest opportunity.

To support the work of the SCG and provide consistency of messaging, a Multi-Agency Information Cell (MAIC) has been formed which provides daily updates from all of the key services on which COVID-19 is impacting in Essex, including health partners, the East of England Ambulance Service, Essex Police, the Essex County Fire and Rescue Service, ports and airports, and local authorities. There are also various Tactical Coordination Groups (TCGs) reporting to the SCG, each with responsibility for one specific workstream. TCGs are formed and closed depending on need. At the time of writing, the TCGs in operation include:

- Death management
- Shielding the vulnerable
- Care Provision – Adults and Children
- Community capacity
- Education and key workers
- Personal protective equipment (PPE)
- Testing
- Regulations and business closure
- Faith and social cohesion
- Data management
- Volunteers
- ERF resilience
- Restoration
- Communications

This joined up multi-agency approach is delivering against the expectations of the government. The SCG is meeting twice-weekly and coordinating the plans and response for Essex. This means that agencies are working together, keeping everyone across Essex as safe as they can, and providing the most up-to-date information as possible.

3.2 The PFCC's Response

Both the PFCC and Essex Police have devised and implemented new ways of delivering services whilst protecting statutory rights. Video consultations have

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been enabled between officers, detainees and their solicitors across Essex custody suites for the first time and the PFCC's Independent Custody Visiting (ICV) scheme has played an important role in ensuring that detainees have continued to be treated as expected (including in respect of access to PPE) during the outbreak. The PFCC's staff have also adapted the ways in which they deliver the PFCC's Restorative and Mediation Service during this time, ensuring that both victims and perpetrators continue to have access to the restorative justice process as a means of helping the former to cope and recover and the latter to understand the impact of and alter their offending behaviours.

The PFCC has repurposed up to £150,000 of the 2020/21 Community Safety Development Fund as a contribution to the Essex Coronavirus Response and Recovery Programme administered by the Essex Community Foundation to support voluntary and community organisations that are responding to and have been adversely impacted by the pandemic. Making this funding available firmly cements the PFCC's partnership work with emergency services, health partners, councils, faith groups and the voluntary sector under the banner #EssexUnites. The funding has already helped several local organisations support those experiencing domestic abuse, vulnerable young people and those at risk of homelessness. The PFCC has also funded the Essex Chamber of Commerce to establish a business support helpline and to match offers of support from the business community with demand across the county.

Throughout the pandemic, the PFCC has produced a weekly video message in order to provide information and reassurance to the people and businesses of Essex and is continuing to engage with the public using social media, including by hosting public meetings on Facebook Live.

The PFCC continues to receive weekly briefings from the Chief Constable and the Chief Fire Officer / Chief Executive on the impact of CoVID-19 on Essex Police and the Essex County Fire and Rescue Service and their response. The PFCC has also convened regular teleconferences of the membership of the Essex Criminal Justice Board (ECJB), whilst the Deputy PFCC has convened fortnightly meetings of the Southend, Essex and Thurrock Domestic Abuse Board (SETDAB) in order to ensure that key stakeholders are kept informed of developments and effective channels of communication are maintained. Finally, the PFCC has played a key role in arranging regular, remote briefings of MPs.

3.3 The Essex Police Response

Essex Police's primary roles during this difficult time have continued to be to save lives, respond to emergency calls and provide reassurance to the community. It has maintained an operating status of "green" or "blue" (no impact) throughout the pandemic.

The Essex Police response is led by a Gold Commander who is responsible for the ongoing assessment of the threat, harm and risk posed to the county by CoVID-19. The force has detailed business continuity plans which have been

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activated as necessary to ensure that police presence is maintained across the county and that the public and partners are reassured that the Force Plan is being delivered irrespective of the circumstances and that the force is continuing to help people, keep people safe and catch criminals. Business continuity measures include calling in officers not currently on duty to provide resilience to frontline services; increased remote working; deploying single patrols where operationally appropriate and implementing social distancing measures while undertaking operational activities. In contrast to the national trend, sickness levels in Essex Police have decreased during the pandemic and the force has experienced one of the lowest levels of absenteeism nationally during this period. Applications to join the force have increased compared with the same time last year, and reconfiguration of the force's methods of delivering training in compliance with social distancing guidelines have enabled all probationer training to continue and delivery of the force growth plan to remain on track.

As a result, there has been no change to the way in which the force has responded to incidents in Essex. Officers have continued to respond under the usual command and control system and through existing team structures. Operational staff are empowered to make decisions in the best interests of the public and have successfully managed changing demand. Core business delivery through team briefings and other essential communication is being maintained. Overall crime has reduced during the pandemic and, as at 29 April 2020, outstanding suspects for the force were at their lowest level since April 2017.

At the start of the coronavirus outbreak, the Government introduced enforcement powers to allow police forces to deal with people who do not comply with sensible social distancing. In line with guidance issued by the National Police Chiefs' Council, the approach Essex Police has taken to encourage the public to adopt the measures necessary to defeat CoVID-19 has been to advise, explain and appeal to people to do the right thing, only using enforcement when absolutely necessary and when reasoned conversations have failed; for example, by instructing gatherings of three or more people to disperse, removing any person from that gathering to their home, or issuing fixed penalty notices. In the main, this approach continues to be well-received by members of the community.

Like the PFCC, Essex Police has also maintained engagement with the public. Some engagement forums such as public meetings and "coffee with cops" have been replaced with outdoor patrols on foot and in vehicles as well as online "virtual conversations" in order for officers and staff to be visible and accessible but safe, in line with Government advice.

Essex Police has been sharing advice and guidance from Action Fraud and has delivered a home safety campaign providing advice and support to potential victims of online sexual offences, domestic abuse and cyber crime (including fraud). The purpose of the campaign has been to:

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- Provide potential and existing victims with support and advice on staying safe;
- Alert potential and existing perpetrators that they will not be able to use the existing situation as an excuse to commit crime, and
- Alert potential and existing perpetrators that Essex Police is still focusing on these offences and that they will be caught.

Though the campaign was produced by Essex Police's Media and Communications Team, it has been made available to be branded by any of the ERF partners to be used across their channels and networks. In addition, the force's Stay Safe at Home campaign, launched on 10 April, seeks to inform and educate the public around what they can do to avoid and lower five key risks to people during this challenging time:

- Domestic abuse;
- Child abuse;
- Accidental house fires;
- Fraud, and
- Bogus callers

This material has also been used by other police forces including Kent and Wiltshire. Recognising the increased risk of domestic violence during "lockdown", a specific Essex Police media campaign was also launched to raise awareness of this issue and encourage victims and perpetrators to access the support commissioned by the PFCC, including online and telephone support services.

3.4 The Essex County Fire and Rescue Service response

ECFRS has maintained an operating status of "amber" (moderate impact) throughout the pandemic and staff absence levels have remained manageable throughout. During the pandemic, there has been no change to the way the fire and rescue service responds to incidents. Keeping people who live, work and travel in Essex safe has remained the service's priority. Although the situation surrounding COVID-19 is unprecedented, ECFRS has a robust operational and business continuity plan which has been regularly updated and tested, so that in events such as this, the service is prepared and confident in meeting these challenges. The service has prepared operational staff who are not currently on front line duty to provide resilience to frontline services where needed; has increased remote working across the whole service, and reduced non-essential interaction with the public, but not at the expense of upholding its emergency service.

Like the PFCC and Essex Police, ECFRS has worked hard to maintain communication and engagement with the public. While it has been necessary to postpone events such as public meetings and station visits, the service has continued to deliver safety messages and updates through its website and social media channels as well as via local media.

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During this time, the service has had to reduce the number of Home Fire Safety and Safe and Well visits its conducts, prioritising them for people who are particularly vulnerable to the risk of fire. However, it has posted home safety advice on You Tube and has continued to provide home safety advice by telephone and has ensured that more staff than ever are available to reassure, educate and advise anyone who needs this information. The service has also continued to deliver smoke alarms to less vulnerable people to fit themselves, as well as supplying literature.

Following discussions between the National Fire Chiefs Council and representative bodies, agreement has been reached regarding additional duties for operational fire and rescue service colleagues to provide support to East of England Ambulance Service Trust (EEAST) colleagues during a time of unprecedented demand on their services. The Essex County Fire and Rescue Service was one of the first in the country to provide 19 fire fighters to work alongside paramedics as ambulance drivers and to help fetch and distribute vital equipment such as stretchers and PPE. On-call fire fighters from stations across Essex have now worked more than 4,000 shifts as ambulance drivers and made more than 40 extra ambulances available across Essex during the pandemic. The service has also supported body recovery work and has provided non-blue light driver training to EEAST colleagues during this time. ECFRS has also been providing ambulance drivers with sites for rest breaks. All such activity has been risk assessed, with additional training and personal protective equipment provided as necessary.

3.5 Essex Resilience Forum communications content and messaging

The proactive communication of the Essex Resilience Forum has focused on four main strands:

- Protecting the vulnerable:
 - Shielding the vulnerable, and
 - Engaging volunteers
- Staying safe in the home:
 - Tackling domestic abuse and supporting victims;
 - Preventing and tackling fraud;
 - Preventing exploitation, and
 - Promoting fire safety in the home
- Social cohesion and communities together:
 - Paying tribute to frontline workers keeping people safe;
 - Activities which bring people together – volunteering, acts of kindness, community spirit, cultural activity, and support to others;
 - Recognising those staying at home and following restrictions;
 - Visible policing in our communities;
 - Accessible and available fire and rescue services, and
 - Emergency services working together
- Health and social care:
 - Building capacity within our health service;
 - Keeping frontline workers safe, and
 - Maintaining frontline services.

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The Essex Communications Group (which includes representatives from Essex Police, the Essex County Fire and Rescue Service and the PFCC's office) has commissioned communications key messaging packs for partner use across the Bank Holiday weekends and beyond to tackle emerging issues such as attendance at recycling centres, country parks and other beauty spots, including as restrictions have been relaxed. Content has been circulated for use by all. The Essex County Fire and Rescue Service and Essex Police have also launched an online education hub to enable them to continue delivering safety lessons to children aged five to 18 while schools are closed.

Representatives of the Essex Resilience Forum have been giving regular media interviews on BBC Essex local radio since 7 April. A regular schedule has been established to ensure local residents are updated on the work of the ERF and wider partners to help keep them safe in these uncertain and challenging times. Topics covered have included:

- The work of the ERF;
- Shielding the vulnerable and the contribution of volunteers;
- Staying safe in the home;
- Business support and the contribution of local businesses, and
- Social cohesion

This year's International Day of Families was used to remind people of the support available across Essex if they need help managing the extra pressure that the CoVID-19 pandemic has put on family life. The key organisations and resources that can help support families with subjects including children's mental health and wellbeing, social distancing and young people, and how to keep children safe online have been collated and shared through the Every Family Matters campaign.

A partnership promotional campaign with Newsquest (online and in print) has also been launched to promote support for businesses, including business grants.

4. Appendices

None.