

MANAGING AIRPORT FIRE & RESCUE SERVICES THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

The management of airport rescue and firefighting services through the pandemic was outlined during a webinar, organised by the Airport Fire Officers' Association (AFOA) to highlight the importance of strong collaboration with staff, training providers and regulators in adapting to the current challenges and to inform future resilience planning.

Airport fire officers and emergency planners from Ireland and the UK recently shared the multiple challenges faced by airport rescue and firefighting services since the outbreak of the pandemic, lessons learned and how the services have overcome and managed the impacts of Covid-19 on their operations.

The devastating effects of the global pandemic on the aviation travel industry were discussed during a webinar, hosted by the Airport Fire Officers' Association (AFOA) at the end of March. One of the key challenges highlighted was in keeping the airports open for business, while a number of firefighters who contracted Covid-19 were out of work, causing a significant loss of staff.

DUBLIN'S COVID RESPONSE

Managing Dublin Airport's Rescue and Fire Fighting Service (RFFS) through the pandemic, Chief Airport Officer Gerry Keogh explained how the outbreak of the pandemic affected the airport and outlined the changes made to keep it fully operational.

Dublin Airport Fire & Rescue Service provides domestic fire and medical response to the airport facilities, including

an operational emergency ambulance. Its crews comprise 100 staff on four watches, 25 of whom are fully trained paramedics. The airport's RFFS responds to approximately 3,000 call-outs annually.

Keogh outlined the procedures they put in place to keep the airport open for essential travel and twice-daily deliveries of medical supplies during the pandemic. When the Government advice changed to 'Stay at Home' all non-essential airport staff stayed at home.

"Health service information desks for those passengers still travelling were set up in the airport. The staff manning these desks were not medical people, so if passengers presented with symptoms of Covid-19, they were sent to an isolation room where airport ambulance crews attended to evaluate patients.

"Ambulance crews in full PPE responded to over 100 of these calls. After each call-out crews showered, while a full change of uniform was required in a new decontamination room at the fire station. The daily checks required all appliances to be fogged and sanitised. Social distancing measures were quickly put in place across the station. This new way of working created a significant amount of additional work," he noted.



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THE AIRPORT FIRE OFFICERS' ASSOCIATION

promotes the professional image and status of airport fire services in Ireland and the UK, by sharing knowledge and best practice on all relevant technical and operational matters.

Membership of the AFOA, which was formed in 1988, is open to airport fire officers as well as local authority liaison officers, manufacturers, training providers and equipment suppliers with whom the AFOA regularly collaborates on projects.

The AGM will take place at the UK's Emergency Services Show 2021 at Birmingham's NEC on 7-8 September. In early December it plans to hold a mini conference focused on training challenges facing the sector, with another one in the first quarter of 2022. The next full-scale conference will be in 2023. For updates visit www.foa.org.uk/events

employs 24 fire and rescue personnel, who also provide the medical response for 7,500 staff members onsite.

Chief Fire Officer Kieran Merriman shared his key learnings and provided additional perspectives since the outbreak of the pandemic. On 18 March 2020 BAE Systems had to suspend all corporate air travel and evacuated the site within three hours. Staff working on key government contracts were designated keyworkers and remained onsite.

"An emergency planning centre was established manned by staff from the security team, fire and rescue service and senior managers. From a business continuity perspective, it was important to avoid cross-contamination between crews so a ban on covering holidays was introduced" he added.

CHANGES TO WORKPLACE CULTURE

"BAE Systems consulted with its clinical governance provider who provided helpful PPE advice. The workplace was made Covid-secure with new cleaning procedures and the disinfection of cabs. Much of this will now stay in place, playing a long-term role at the station, in the prevention of seasonal flu, for example," Merriman noted.

He said that a major challenge to social distancing was the layout of the fire station with its common walkways, so a second fire station was set up. "Carrying this out in the

CONTINGENCY PLANS

At one critical stage between mid-March and mid-April 2020 a number of firefighters contracted Covid-19 and were out of work. Following a full review of safety protocols, contingency plans were activated for a scenario where an entire watch was out of action, while military resources were also put on standby.

Keogh explained that a fire and rescue crew from Cork Airport had been drafted in. "Based at a remote location airside, they worked very well for a number of weeks. The crew isolated in a hotel and did not come into the station. No switches or overtime was allowed. A further 21 further health and safety measures were introduced at the station which have proven successful in preventing the spread of the virus.

"All paramedics have now been vaccinated and asymptomatic testing takes place for all staff members every Thursday. There have been no further cases of Covid in the airport fire service since June 2020. Some staff experienced issues with fatigue, while a new medical term called 'Long Covid' has required some adjustments to working patterns."

WARTON AERODROME

In the UK, BAE Systems (Operations) Ltd, based at Warton Aerodrome near the Lancashire town of Preston, operates civilian flights as well as being the designated base for the manufacture and testing of Hawk and Typhoon aircraft. It



"Additional health and safety measures have proven successful in preventing the spread of the virus" – Gerry Keogh, CFO at Dublin Airport Fire & Rescue Service.



*Kieran Merriman,
Chief Fire Officer at
Warton's Airport Fire
& Rescue Service.*

middle of a pandemic and ensuring it was both Covid-secure and met all operational requirements presented an enormous amount of work," he added.

Thermal image temperature screening and cleaning stations were introduced with guidance issued to staff in digestible formats such as presentations, so they knew what to expect when coming onto the site. Being 'wrapped in cotton' wool was a quite an alien experience to staff but ultimately resulted in some positive changes to workplace culture.

BUSINESS CONTINUITY PLAN

A Degradation Plan was devised to give clarity and confidence to staff on what to do if departmental managers became incapacitated, and this now forms an important part of the Business Continuity Plan, according to CFO Kieran Merriman.

Recruiting staff during a pandemic also presented challenges. Selection testing could not be carried out onsite in the usual way, and online psychometric tests were used instead to rank candidates. This new approach represented an improved method of selection, whilst using remote interviews and evidence from training records proved a less reliable means of assessing candidates' physical and practical aptitude.

"Training exercises took longer due to the additional PPE required (for example, half the number of facemask respirators were required for drivers spending time in appliance cabs). These changes required a good level of understanding and partnership working with the International Fire Training Centre as well as trade unions, BAE Systems health and safety consultants, management and regulators."

CHANGES TO TRAINING PROTOCOL

He explained that a rigorous four-stage process is now in place to approve anyone applying for a residential training course. "However, some of the changes made to training protocols have resulted in cost-efficiencies and will be taken forward post-pandemic," he said.

NEW FIRE TRUCKS LAND AT DUBLIN AIRPORT

With the recent delivery of the Rosenbauer Panther High Reach Extendable Turret Fire Trucks to Dublin Airport Fire & Rescue Service – two further trucks are due to arrive before the end of July.

"The trucks will provide rapid acceleration is possible due to high horsepower-to-weight ratio, maintaining top speed, extreme mobility (off-road and paved-road operation), while reliable braking system type ABS will allow the emergency crew to safely reach the scene of an accident even under toughest conditions.

The extinguishing agent's tanks hold 12,000 litres of water and 1,500 litres of foam as well as 250Kg of dry powder. Each truck is also equipped with the latest crash rescue equipment, three FLIR Thermal Image cameras and two-colour cameras. They also have the latest in emergency lighting in blue and red LEDs and all driving lights and scene lights are also LED for reliability and brightness.

The vehicles have under-body fire protection and heavy-duty steel bumpers covered with elements made of glass fibre-reinforced material to protect the lower cab section. The driving compartment can accommodate a crew of four with a Rosenbauer panorama view safety cab and is ergonomically designed. Its instrument panel is equipped with all necessary controls, instruments, warning lights and controls/switches for the firefighting system on the centre console.



A version "1.6 of Easements for Rescue and Fire Fighting Services at Licensed or Certified Aerodromes", now available on the AFOA website, has been based on the impacts of Covid-19 and covers both financial and operational necessities, according to Andy Fraser, an inspector with the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA).

With public health and assurance restart visits by the regulator to gradually resume, Fraser encouraged the continuation of emergency planning meetings and discussions in the meantime.