

REPORT OF SERVICE DIRECTOR - CUSTOMERS, GOVERNANCE AND EMPLOYEES

FIRE SAFETY - UPDATE

Purpose of the Report

1. To inform members on action being taken to review and maintain safe emergency fire and evacuation arrangements in key County Office buildings.

Background

2. Over time ways of working have changed from fixed office-based working to the hybrid approach of today. This added flexibility brings challenges in respect of planning and availability of staff to undertake voluntary roles that support fire emergencies and evacuation.
3. The report and action focusses on the larger County Office premises spread across the county. Other buildings primarily occupied by Adult Social Care and Health such as Day Services or Children's and Family Services, and Youth Centres have their own embedded systems and evacuation arrangements.
4. Staffing attendance is more predictable and consistent in the non-County Office estate however shared learning from the review of fire arrangements can be applied together with the new training package being accessible for all sites.
5. Covid -19 and subsequent working from home during lockdowns has compounded the problem but in itself is not the sole cause, we have a smaller workforce from which to draw volunteers and cannot reasonably pre-plan for their attendance for fire cover at any given time or location.
6. The Regulatory Reform Fire (Safety Order) 2005 and the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 places legal duties on the authority to provide effective systems and means of escape in the event of a fire. Compliance is reflected in our fire risk assessments, but these are based on systems having guaranteed Fire Marshal and Fire Warden cover within specified buildings.
7. An incident at Lawn View House in June 2021 confirmed the need for a review and move to a more dynamic and flexible approach.

8. It is against this background that a thorough review was required to safeguard staff, building users and fulfil our legal duties.

Identifying areas for improvement

9. Building on feedback from the Lawn View House incident, a minor and contained fire within a microwave initiating a full building evacuation, it was decided to further examine current evacuation preparedness across a broader range of sites.
10. Observed evacuation practices were undertaken across six sites focussing on:
 - Time to evacuate the building
 - Did all occupiers evacuate as planned?
 - Accuracy of signing in /out forms
 - Actions taken by fire wardens and marshals
 - Was the assembly point known and used?
 - Ability to implement Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans.
11. Key learning points from the observed evacuations include limited trained staff available to undertake fire warden and marshal roles, inconsistency of fire safety signage and equipment locations, lack of awareness of 'fire warden sweep zones', extended evacuation times with some staff having to be prompted to evacuate and inaccuracies in signing in or out.
12. Outcomes were shared with Arc's fire compliance team as background information to a detailed report focussing on considerations for effective evacuation in a hybrid working model.
13. Subsequently a project team plan consisting of representatives from Arc, Corporate Property, Facilities Management, Health and Safety and Communications was established to develop an improvement and new workable approach within the known constraints.

New approach to Fire Evacuation- 'Listen Look Leave'

14. The aim is to enable all staff to undertake fire warden duties during evacuations with the addition of designated fire wardens leading when available. Similarly, where fire marshals aren't available, acting fire wardens can provide cover in their absence.
15. For ease of understanding the strapline Listen, Look, Leave will be used to convey immediate actions to be taken by all evacuating staff. The flow chart in Appendix 1 indicates the new evacuation approach in outline.
16. Staff will initially be guided to look to the new 'Fire Points' to see if the fire wardens vest has been taken, the fire warden role being fulfilled or if they take action themselves.
17. A new intranet resource and information page will be available providing links to evacuation guidance, infographics and briefing videoclips.
18. More formal training will be via the existing mandatory Fire Awareness module on 'My Learning My Career' which will be revised to incorporate the new approach.

19. Training is monitored for uptake and discussed with staff at annual review. New systems for managers to monitor team completion of mandatory training has now been rolled out and includes fire awareness training.
20. The evacuation of visitors will continue to be the responsibility of the officers that they are meeting with. Information on evacuation procedures and fire alarm tests will be drawn to their attention when signing in and are posted on notice boards through the buildings.
21. Additional supporting improvements are:
- Signed fire points in offices holding fire wardens' vests and zone information cards
 - Re-mapped fire warden sweep zones on laminated cards. These have been reduced in number and colour coded for ease of use
 - Zone cards contain other essential information including safe refuge areas
 - Fire warden vests changed to red to avoid confusion with other high visibility clothing present
 - Fire boxes located by the fire panel with essential user information and site documentation
 - General upgraded fire signage including removal of obsolete material.
 - Enhanced frequency of fire evacuation practices to embed learning

Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans

22. A separate review of Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans (PEEPs) for those persons requiring assisted evacuation is being undertaken. We are consulting with the Business Disability Forum on current best practice and outcomes will be fed into the overall new approach.
23. Relevant training will be provided in the use of evacuation aides 'Evac-chairs' and evacuation mattresses. Awareness covered on induction and more specific focussed training for those in roles supporting evacuation.

Elected Members Arrangements

24. County Hall fire safety arrangements are included in the Elected Members induction programme. Participation in fire evacuation practices builds upon the initial training.
25. Fire safety is considered within risk assessments for Council Meetings, Officers present will always adopt lead roles including fire warden area sweeps during any evacuation.

Other Options Considered

26. Consultation has taken place with other authorities and private sector organisations. A range of options have been considered from remaining as we are, formal rotoring of staff or 'first on site' undertaking Fire Warden/ Marshal roles. All are dependent on staff availability.

Reasons for Recommendation

27. The new system identified offers the best workable solution under hybrid working arrangements where attendance is less predictable and reinforces a culture of individual behavioural safety.
28. It also balances what can be realistically achieved against our legal duty and provides a foundation for future and continuous improvement.

Statutory and Policy Implications

29. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, data protection and information governance finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, smarter working, sustainability and the environment and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

Data Protection and Information Governance

30. There are no implications arising directly from this report as no individual or personal data or information is used.

Financial Implications

31. The cost for implementing the new arrangements will be met from existing budgets.

Human Resources Implications

32. These are outlined in the body of the report. The health and safety support provided in line with government guidance aims to ensure the continued health safety and wellbeing of staff.

Public Sector Equality Duty implications

33. The proposals in this report meet the Council's existing commitment to meeting the statutory requirements of the Equality Act 2010.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Members:

- 1) Support the proposed approach to changes to fire evacuation procedures.
- 2) Receive a progress report on Fire Safety incorporated in the next Health and Safety update in May 2022.

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Chief Executives Department

For any enquiries about this report please contact:

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Constitutional Comments (KK 11/01/2022)

34. The proposals in this report are within the remit of the Personnel Committee.

Financial Comments (SES 07/01/2022)

35. There are no specific financial implications arising directly from this report.

36. The cost for implementing the new arrangements will be met from existing budgets.

HR Comments (JP 11/01/2022)

37. Any Human Resources implications are highlighted in the report.

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

- None

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

- All