

Database aids flood resilience at Tyne and Wear

Tyne and Wear's **Steve Anderson** reports on how the development of an Operational Assurance Database has ensured continual improvement across all areas of operational response and, specifically, during flood conditions

An unprecedented amount of rain fell across the Tyne and Wear area on June 28, resulting in Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service (TWFRS) receiving more than 1,000 calls between 1500 and 0000. The sheer volume of calls stretched our control room resources to the limit, even with the additional personnel that were drafted in at short notice to staff every available phone.

Calls were also received by our colleagues in Durham and Darlington, Northumberland, North Yorkshire, Leicestershire, Derbyshire and even as far afield as Devon and Somerset to flooding incidents in the TWFRS area.

Telephones also started to ring in various departments throughout our service headquarters as our colleagues in control rooms around the country attempted to pass details of the calls they were taking on our behalf. It was at this point that we realised that something more than the 'heavy rain' predicted was occurring.

Due to the potential for disruption to our service delivery, senior management, in line with our business continuity management (BCM) arrangements, convened the Emergency Management Group (EMG) who themselves formed two key groups. One group focused on maintaining our operational response and the other on our business continuity plans relating to our staff and building stock.

The EMG quickly implemented 'spate conditions', maintaining a limited operational cover at key locations to respond to primary fires and other life-threatening incidents. The remainder of our frontline operational fleet were all deployed to flooding incidents, attending one after another.

Incidents varied from the rescue of numerous families from their homes in Gateshead using the emergency rescue boat (ERB), to our Swift Water Rescue Team rescuing people from their cars stranded in flood water on the 'central motorway' in Newcastle. Vast amounts of water were pumped out of a building that housed IT server equipment that was critical for the mobilisation of other emergency services throughout the country.

Because the demands on our services were at their highest at the changeover of shifts (1800), this caused additional problems, as returning appliances back to their home stations to allow the nightshift to take over proved a major challenge.



Group Manager Steve Anderson,
Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue
Service

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Traffic around the Tyneside area was at a standstill, so a number of nightshift personnel were unable to get into work, but we were able to staff appliances with a mix of dayshift and nightshift crews. It was not until around 2200 that the last appliance was staffed fully with a nightshift crew.

The implementation of our 'recall to duty' procedure was considered by the EMG, however, it was decided that because of the traffic gridlock and the fact that the oncoming duty crews could not get to their respective stations, then recalling additional staff would not be beneficial.

As the rain eased we were able to 'catch up' and expand the types of incident we attended from those involving life risk to others, including pumping from major trunk roads to ease traffic congestion.

Dealing with other people's emergencies is our business. However, doing so whilst faced with our own is not something we do on a regular basis. But this was the situation we found ourselves in as five of our fire stations were themselves affected by the floods. Our robust BCM arrangements, which were managed by the EMG, ensured that our service to the public was not affected due to our own business interruptions.

Operational Assurance Database

The next day we caught our breath and took stock of what had occurred. There was general agreement all round that we had coped well with the demands placed upon us, especially in light of the limited warning we received. However, when we had time to reflect we realised that there were a number of lessons to be learned. This was confirmed when, as per our procedures, we asked operational crews and all others involved to complete debrief forms.

All the issues raised on the debrief forms were collated and recorded onto a performance and review report within our Operational Assurance Database. The database is not only used to record the issues, but to record the action plans, who is responsible for implementing these plans and timescales for completion.

In addition to operational matters being recorded on the report, those involving business continuity were also included. All the issues were then used to form the agenda for an internal debrief that took place on September 6.



Eastwood Gardens, Felling, Tyne and Wear

The internal debrief covered such areas as our response, any training implications, health and safety matters, transport, multi-agency liaison, communications, mobilising and business continuity. The action plans were discussed at length and several alterations made. Some action plans could be addressed immediately, while others were set completion dates after discussion and agreement with those allocated responsibility.

Regional Debrief

At the request of the Chief Fire and Rescue Advisors' Unit, a regional debrief was also hosted by our service to discuss the national impact of these unprecedented events. The results of this debrief will be shared amongst other fire and rescue services nationally.

Although not on the same scale, we have suffered from further floods since June 28. Again, debrief forms were requested for all these incidents and, along with additional reports from performance and review officers who attended, any areas identified for improvement were recorded on the Operational Assurance Database and action plans produced.

The use of an Operational Assurance Database ensures continual improvement across all areas of our operational response. In the case of flooding incidents it has led to

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many changes that include improvements to our standard operating procedures, wet weather personal protective equipment, swiftwater rescue team operations, greater resilience for call handling, additional training for all personnel and enhanced communications with the Met Office.

The floods of June 28 are said to be a one in a 100 years event. However, the lessons learned from that eventful day have ensured that as a fire and rescue service we can offer the communities of Tyne and Wear, and beyond, an enhanced response to any future flooding incidents.

About the Author:

Steve Anderson is Group Manager, Contingencies and Special Projects, Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service. Steve has served with Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service since 1989 and currently works in Contingencies and Special Projects. His responsibilities include the management and implementation of the service's environment strategy, business continuity, Firelink and operational assurance.

Prior to taking up his current role, Steve served at a number of locations on an operational level and also completed a secondment to the Fire Service College. He has also worked across different departments within the Service, including station management and the learning and development department, where he was involved in the introduction of the New Dimension projects.