



## On-call Guidance and Options for Maintenance of Competence

### Introduction

On-call staff (also known as Retained Duty) staff, are a critical resource for the majority of Fire and Rescue Services. The COVID-19 pandemic along with the Government's response provides unique challenges regarding how the FRS maintain competence during such unprecedented times.

The objective is to provide national guidance around 'recommendations and options' for on-call staff to maintain their skills and competence whilst under restrictions to normal business as usual practices, to minimise the unintentional spread of the virus. Some risk critical training (such as Breathing Apparatus, Command and Control and emergency response driving) may need to take place to ensure a response capability is not compromised.

It is clear FRSs are operating in challenging times where we are required to provide emergency response activities whilst balancing this against the advice and guidance from the Government is to isolate or maintain a minimum two metres social distancing.

Individual FRSs will have controls in place to reduce the risk of COVID-19 for operational incidents thus enabling frontline staff the protection necessary to provide our core service to the public. However, FRSs need to be assured that firefighters remain competent to perform operational activities in order to provide an effective response to emergencies when they occur. The risk of this training not occurring are skills fade resulting in increased risk to firefighters and the public. Health and safety legislation has not been relaxed and therefore there is a statutory responsibility to ensure staff are competent to carry out their duties.

The impact of any skill-fade will be dependent on the nature of the skill and activity.

Any lack of skill or competence in these areas increases the risk to life of those undertaking the activity as well as to the public we serve to protect. Where applicable, each FRS will need to review their IRMP in order to identify any change to the community risk profile, such as reduced vehicle movements, increased occupancy in domestic dwellings, or staff assisting the NHS/ambulance service and needing to upskill their first aid/trauma training. Once complete FRSs will have an understanding of the risks they need to ensure their firefighters remain competent to meet. Services are encouraged to align and prioritise their maintenance of skills, training and frequency on a risk-based approach.

## Guidance

These recommendations are to assist FRSs implement additional balanced and proportionate control measures to help stop the spread of the Coronavirus whilst maintaining a competent workforce. The recommendations are generic to allow differences in FRSs risk and training requirements.

### NFCC Guidance

- All weekly practical training periods be suspended for at least three weeks, in alignment with the UK Government's period of 'lockdown'. Up to one month's suspension should have little impact to knowledge and skill-fade.
- Each FRS should utilise e-learning if able to do so. Access to the National Fire Learn portal can assist with material.
- Each FRS should assess their service maintenance of competence matrix, utilising their own training departments to ascertain additional core skills required specific to their service requirements.
- Each FRS should consider the extension of requalification on a risk-assessed basis
- Each FRS should carry out virtual Command and Control training, supported by validation by assessors maintaining social distancing guidance. Re-qualification could also utilise remote simulation models such as XVR simulation, as an example.
- Each FRS should produce guidance either written or in video format (if available) around 'social distancing' and hygiene requirements for station-based training.
- Each FRS will have skill sets for determining a competent firefighter. During this pandemic it should be modified, on a risk assessed basis, whilst maintaining the "safe to ride" concept.

The NFCC welcome innovation from local stations that provide learning alternatives while maintaining safe working practices.

## Options for each FRS to consider

### Operational Response

#### Mobilising to the station

Each FRS should follow Government guidance provided by the appropriate public health body for each of the administrative areas, regarding PPE when mobilising to, and returning from, incidents.

- Reduced crew numbers

Roster each appliance to a maximum of six crew responding to station. On arrival, assess the incident type. For lower risk incidents, for example secondary or automatic fire alarm, mobilise with minimum crewing levels. For any other incident type mobilise as normal.

- Non riding crew paid to clean station and returning appliances

One of the remaining crew at the station could wipe down all hard surfaces and make the station secure. This could attract locally agreed remuneration.

- Pay crew not to attend

Stations rostering crews may have crew available but not required due to reduced crewing levels. Those crew not attending could still receive the normal attendance fee to discourage crews turning in. The advantage of this is minimising interaction between crew, whilst recognising those declaring availability but not required at that time.

### **Returning from an incident**

- Train on return to station immediately following an incident

This would allow crews to carry out short duration, risk-based training such as Breathing Apparatus drill upon return to station after an incident. Crew members would have been together for the incident so are likely to have already breached social distancing guidance. Records to be kept of all taking part.

When the appliance returns or following training one crew member from each appliance could wipe down all appliance internal hard surfaces, followed by the station. This could attract locally agreed remuneration.

### **Practical**

As Government advice changes it may be possible to relax some of the rules around social distancing. Until this time, if FRSs are concerned that the risks of skills fade outweigh the risk of spreading COVID-19 to operational staff the following measures could be adopted:

- Split stations into smaller groups

Stations could be split into smaller response groups, attending weekly training on different nights, still enabling quality practical training, with smaller groups of staff. If possible, the groups could provide cover on together, to maintain smaller team concepts. This would minimise contact between the wider station.

- Extension of weekly training time

If drill nights are split over two weeks for split stations, the drill could be extended with additional e-learning.

- Virtual weekly training

This can be facilitated by using technology, for example web cams/workplace chat etc. to crew members working remotely.

- E-learning

Each FRS should immediately utilise e-learning if able to do so. Access to the National Fire Learn portal can assist with material

- Minimum number of crew for standard testing

Essential maintenance and standard testing should be carried out as normal, however maximum crew levels (two) to complete the testing, ensuring physical distancing guidance is adhered to.

- Rotate BA wearers

Operational BA wears should be monitored to ensure crews, as reasonably as practicable, share BA wearing. This ensures a greater number of crew members maintain competence gained at operational incidents. If possible, assess BA wearers for competence during the incident and record results.

- Rotate the Command and Control and Driver role

The incident commander and driver role should be monitored to ensure, as reasonably as practicable, qualified personnel share the role at different incidents. This ensures a greater number of crew members maintain competence gained at operational incidents. If possible, assess drivers and ICs for competence during the incident / response and record results.

- Additional crew member to respond in service vehicle

If a service vehicle is available, appliances could mobilise with a crew of four, plus one in a service vehicle. This would allow greater social distancing in the appliance, on route to the incident. Individual FRS should assess how physical distancing can be managed whilst crews ride an appliance in compliance with NHS guidance.

- Creating training cells from station personnel

The current situation could provide an opportunity to look at new ways of working. OICs could assess and group personnel into groups of three different types, made up of one of each of the following;

1. Happy to train – will look at a subject, do homework, understand procedures
2. New keen to learn - confirm knowledge, skills and understanding
3. Experienced - long term staff who can share operational knowledge

The training session could be in three parts: Theory, Equipment Familiarisation and Basic Practical Use. Initially e-learning at home, attend the station for familiarisation followed by practical setup and use. The practical training should align to any current training requirements. Evidence capture could be via photographs to a designation member of the management team.

- Three-month grace for training courses

All non-critical courses could be suspended. Critical courses such as Breathing Apparatus/Command and Control should be managed locally under strict risk assessed governance with reduced group numbers.

## Control Measures for Practical Training

Where practical training is required to mitigate hands on skill fade the following additional controls are advised:

1. Staff who are concerned they may be carrying the virus, in line with PHE advice must not attend the training.
2. Social distancing is to be maintained as far as is reasonably practicable.
3. Minimise numbers attending to those required of the activity.
4. Prior to commencing training all are to wash their hands / use sanitiser gel.
5. Appropriate respiratory/eye protection is to be worn in line with national guidance, where social distancing is not achievable.
6. All equipment utilised is to be thoroughly cleaned / sanitised after individuals have handled them.
7. Where possible limit the time of training exposure to staff and equipment used.
8. Focus training towards the identified risk areas indicated in a revised IRMP in light of COVID-19 impact and restrictions (train for the situation).

Enabling maintenance of competence through training whilst mitigating the risk posed by COVID-19 will remain a challenge. It is a hazard that cannot be seen and as such, the above approach for hands-on training is a pragmatic risk-based approach when balanced against the risk of skill-fade.

It is the responsibility of FRSs to assess their local risk when deciding on the safest approach, this must include any local prevalence / infection rate of COVID-19 within their areas.

A high-incident rate locally may necessitate a move back to full practical training being delayed further.

The principles set out by the then-CFOA of competences such as Command & Control, Breathing Apparatus, Casualty Care, Driving, Water Safety, Height, Hazmat, Extrication, Pumps and Ladders are still relevant. Each competence will require a framework of control measures, from individuals carrying out e-learning in the initial month, moving to small practical elements with reduced crew numbers, leading ultimately back to business as usual.

Training leads/management teams on stations should ensure they split themselves between teams to ensure interaction with a minimum number of staff is achieved.

Staff in development must be considered as their retention levels will be different of those competent members. They should focus on aspects of their development which does not require or limits exposure to others. Any work undertaken should aim to alleviate any extension to their development period as much as possible.

### Suggested Timeline

1 month	2–4 months	Recovery
<p>Suspend drill nights for the month</p> <p>E-learning to take place</p> <p>Carry out virtual drill nights via webcam or other media</p> <p>Implement after incident training for the returning crew</p> <p>Rotate BA wearers as much as possible at different incidents</p> <p>Ensure Command and Control qualified crew share the role at different incidents</p> <p>Reduced crew numbers for standard testing. In addition to the tests, carry out some basic training such as set up and use RTC equipment</p>	<p>Re-introduce drill nights utilising one of the above-mentioned options</p> <p>Carry on with all aspects from month one</p> <p>Ensure small targeted training is implemented around high risk core skills such as BA along with regular Start Up/Close Down drills</p> <p>Ensure all other core skills are re-visited such as ladders, pumps etc.</p> <p>Carry out training outside as much as possible to maintain social distancing</p>	<p>Move back towards normal drill night sessions</p> <p>Re-introduce courses that had been suspended</p>

## **Note**

All staff, irrespective of role/service have a part to play in maintaining competence throughout the forthcoming months and beyond, with a responsibility to practice safe working.

The success of adhering to this document will be the local managers. FRSs should consider the recommendations and options and produce local briefing notes for Watch/Crew Managers.

**Document version 1.1. This document will evolve as the situation changes pace and will remain 'live'.**