



COVID-19: Guidance & options - maintenance of competence

April 2020

The Covid-19 pandemic, along with the Government's response provides unique challenges regarding how the FRS maintain competence during such unprecedented times.

This national guidance provides 'recommendations and options' for FRS's to maintain their skills and competence whilst restrictions apply. Some risk critical training (such as Breathing Apparatus, Incident Command, Control room and emergency response driving) may need to take place to ensure response capability is not compromised.

It is clear, FRS's are operating in challenging times, balancing emergency response activities with the advice and guidance from the Government to isolate or maintain a minimum 2 metres social distancing.

FRSs need to be assured that personnel remain competent to perform operational activities whilst providing an effective response to emergencies when they occur.

The Health & Safety executive state that *"unless training is required by health & safety legislation within a set timeframe, then HSE will not take action if timescales are not met. However, we (HSE) would expect that employees are competent to do the work they are required to do, as this is a fundamental duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974. Competence is defined as 'skills, knowledge, experience and training'".*

This means that where legislation requires training to be completed in a defined time then the HSE expects compliance, however where FRS have set their own timescales for achievement of competence it is for FRS to consider whether these can be adjusted taking account of the balance between staff/public safety and maintenance of competence.

Any skills decay in these areas increases the safety risks to those undertaking the activity as well as to the public we serve to protect. Each FRS will need to review their risk matrix to identify any change to the community risk profile and balance this against the need to maintain skills.

NFCC Guidance

These options may assist FRS to implement proportionate control measures to help stop the spread of the Coronavirus whilst maintaining a competent workforce.

- Consider alternative approaches for weekly practical training for employees conditioned to the On-call duty system aligned to the Governments period of 'lockdown'. Reduced numbers for example, by splitting an on-call crew over more than one drill night, restricted to risk critical training only, periodic reviews undertaken to consider longer term impact.
- Utilise e-learning training packages, including the National Fire Learn portal.
- Assess service maintenance of competence matrices to ascertain additional core skill requirements, specific to individual service needs.
- Consider extending of re-qualification timescales on a risk assessed basis, taking cognisance of HSE advice and guidance.
- Consider virtual Incident Command training, Re-qualification delivered through remote simulation models.
- Produce guidance to all employees in relation to 'social distancing' and hygiene requirements.

The NFCC welcomes innovation that provides learning alternatives while maintaining safe working practices.

Options for each FRS to consider

- Train on return to station immediately following an incident

Risk based approach to training – Crews will be working within a small group at the incident, this provides an opportunity to deliver practical training scenarios within a controlled environment.

Follow NFCC guidance on cleaning/disinfecting equipment following the incident and training session.

- Reduce the number of crew members training together

Enabling practical training, with smaller groups of staff minimising contact between the wider station.

- Virtual training

Utilise technology, for example web cams/workplace chat etc. for crew members working remotely.

- Minimum number of crew for standard testing and maintenance of equipment

Essential maintenance and standard testing should be carried out as normal, however; minimum crew levels to complete the testing.

- BA Competency

HSE guidance on the frequency of assessment and maintenance of competence must be adhered to, consider:

- Reducing the instructor to student ratio on courses,
- Any pre-course study that can be delivered virtually,
- The essential 'assessable' elements that must be delivered to maintain competence.
- Provide opportunities for local training sessions.

Operational BA wears should be monitored to ensure crews, so far as reasonably practicable, share BA wearing at operational incidents. If possible, assess BA wearers for competence during the incident and record results.

- Rotate Incident Command duties

Operational incident commanders should be monitored to ensure, so far as reasonably practicable, qualified personnel share the role at operational incidents.

- Driving FRS vehicles

Operational crew members should be monitored to ensure, so far as reasonably practicable, qualified personnel rotate driving responsibilities.

Assessing risk critical training frequencies

Timescales for most, if not all, FRS Core Competence training is set within the Fire and Rescue Service, FRS's can use flexibility around these at this time. Safety critical training (BA) should clearly be prioritised, but decisions should be risk based. If individuals demonstrate on-going competence, then full training may not be required.

Control Measures for Practical Training aide Memoir

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, must not attend training or their place of work, they should follow PHE advice in relation to self-isolation and should contact their service in order to secure a Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) test.
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, wash hands / use sanitiser gel.
5. All equipment utilised is to be thoroughly cleaned / sanitised after individuals have handled them.
6. Restrict training to subjects identified through individual service requirements, prioritising risk critical activities

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