

# Kent Fire & Rescue's pandemic response

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Kent Fire & Rescue Service worked with a variety of local organisations to support public services and vulnerable residents. Two examples include:

- 1) Collaboration with the South East Coast Ambulance Service to drive ambulances and manage the logistics of distributing PPE equipment among hospitals.
- 2) Building a new relationship with Age UK to deliver meals to elderly and vulnerable people who were isolating.

## Collaborating with SECAmb to support the ambulance service

### Who was involved?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, **Kent Fire & Rescue Service (KFRS) supported the South East Coast Ambulance Service (SECAmb)** in a number of ways. KFRS undertook a range of activities building on its well-established relationship with SECAmb and the skills of KFRS personnel, including trauma care and blue light driving. At the outset of the pandemic in the UK, KFRS offered its help to SECAmb. Initially, this was with engineering support and logistics, for example, distributing PPE equipment. However, as the crisis progressed, the range of support increased to include firefighters working alongside paramedics to crew ambulances from late 2020 when a large proportion of local paramedics were off work due to COVID-19.

*“At the height of the pandemic, a single ambulance was using a week’s worth of PPE in a day. This overran the ambulance service’s logistics operation. KFRS deployed personnel with logistics skills to support ambulance service colleagues to run the operation and undertake deliveries [for example, of PPE equipment]. KFRS colleagues volunteered for this activity, working on the operation when they would not have been on duty and crewing fire appliances. In this way, KFRS was able to help out without taking fire appliances off the run.”* – Mark Rist, Director of Operations, KFRS

### How were decisions made?

Through ‘business as usual’ links between KFRS and SECAmb, managers at all levels maintained a flow of information regarding pressures, demands and potential support. SECAmb established a dedicated **COVID Management Group** to facilitate decision-making within the ambulance service. To work with KFRS, SECAmb had to put a request to this group, setting out the need for more staff support. The COVID Management Group met daily and consisted of executive level leaders. SECAmb managers could make requests to this group and would typically receive a decision in 24 to 48 hours, much faster than usual. Although fast decision-making was essential for responding to requests for resources and staffing support, the Trust had an unprecedented amount of pressure requiring all NHS providers, including SECAmb, to rapidly address a large number of complex issues, including staff safety and welfare, which had to be addressed regularly. Formal requests for support from SECAmb to KFRS were made through the Kent Resilience Forum, which met regularly to manage and mitigate all aspects of the pandemic on the communities of Kent and Medway.

*"KFRS colleagues showed real open-mindedness and commitment to supporting SECAMB's work in our communities. As a result, KFRS was able to move quickly to support the requests of our partner blue light service."* – Mark Rist, Director of Operations, KFRS

#### What has been the impact?

A major impact of collaboration concerned **logistics and service delivery**. KFRS personnel were instrumental in keeping SECAMB ambulances supplied and available to the public. For example, on occasions, in order to support the wider NHS, KFRS colleagues moved PPE to hospitals that had been delivered in error to the ambulance service.

The extra support from KFRS also meant that ambulance crews could be deployed more effectively. Traditionally, some calls to the ambulance service were attended by two ambulances and crews in order to provide enough personnel to resolve the incident safely. At SECAMB's request, KFRS agreed to send a fire crew to many of these incidents with one ambulance. This freed up the second ambulance for other calls. This arrangement built on the tradition of firefighters and ambulance crews working alongside each other at incidents such as road traffic collisions.

KFRS also deployed some volunteer personnel to work alongside SECAMB colleagues to crew ambulances. Because KFRS firefighters are all trained in intermediate emergency care and can drive large emergency vehicles under blue light conditions, they were able to use these transferable skills to support SECAMB colleagues.

*"The COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging for our communities and for organisations servicing those communities. However, SECAMB and KFRS were able to build upon our traditional close links to rapidly expand the range of services that KFRS was able to undertake for or with SECAMB colleagues. Both organisations are committed to building on the work undertaken during the pandemic to strengthen our working links for the benefit of our communities in future."* – Mark Rist, Director of Operations, KFRS

During the pandemic, aspects of collaboration between KFRS and SECAMB became more formalised by necessity. For example, HR, lead managers and officers had to ensure working hours were aligned as ambulance and fire services have different contractual obligations. Owing to the massive increase in PPE demand, KFRS staff were seconded to SECAMB to assist with logistics management and delivery for a number of months. KFRS firefighters were also seconded to assist with driving ambulances alongside ambulance staff. There was ongoing liaison with control rooms, maintained remotely as the pandemic developed. This helped to build cross-organisation knowledge.

## Supporting Age UK to help vulnerable residents

#### Who was involved?

The number of people supported by Age UK in parts of Kent doubled during the pandemic, with Age UK also providing support across a wider area. KFRS was keen to help communities so contacted Age UK to assist in delivering meals and supporting elderly and vulnerable people who were isolating. This was especially useful as Age UK was heavily reliant on volunteers on furlough. When people returned to work, they saw a drop off in the number of available volunteers making KFRS's support important for continuing the service effectively.

### How were decisions made?

Decision-making between KFRS and Age UK was initially challenging as the collaboration was being set up at speed and from scratch. The difficulties were mainly logistical. For example, how to ensure volunteers from the fire service had the correct training and documentation (such as enhanced DBS checks), where to get vehicles to deliver meals, and how to get staff to the locations most in need.

To facilitate the co-ordination of queries and resources, KFRS set up a **dedicated 'tasking cell'**, which consisted of a central, named contact at KFRS to whom Age UK could make requests for support or information. Over time, the KFRS tasking cell team developed a good understanding of Age UK's needs, allowing fast and effective co-ordination of requests and resources. This shared understanding meant KFRS could refer any issues or hazards back to Age UK, such as people living in unsafe accommodation or who needed extra support. KFRS stressed the importance of listening to Age UK so that decision-making was more effective and reflected their organisational needs.

*"We have never done work like this before. We need to listen to Age UK, find out what needs to be done and then work on that basis."* – Colin King, Assistant Director for Customer Safety, KFRS

### What has been the impact?

The collaboration has expanded Age UK's reach by helping to **identify elderly and vulnerable people** previously unknown to them. One man started receiving meals from Age UK during the pandemic. When KFRS volunteers met him, they found he was a hoarder and living in unsafe conditions. KFRS conducted a 'Safe and Well Visit' and raised his case with Age UK to provide further support. Collaboration with KFRS also helped to **boost morale** among Age UK staff as it was clear they were both working to achieve common goals.

*"Not only did the firefighters help with delivering meals to the clients but they also lifted staff morale – it was really good."* – Cleo Smith, Chief Officer, Age UK Ashford

## Challenges for collaboration

### Structures

- Age UK noted that, prior to the pandemic, they were often in **competition** with other organisations such as GP consortia for contracts to provide services commissioned by CCGs. This discouraged the sharing of resources or closer ways of working.
- KFRS and SECAMB noted that services in different regions had their own **internal systems and bureaucracies**, for example differences in whether fire service staff were permitted to drive ambulances. This meant SECAMB had to fulfil separate administrative requirements for each fire service it worked with, slowing decision-making. To enable collaboration in future, they felt such processes needed to be formalised and standardised to simplify any bureaucracy. This would allow services to have all necessary structures and HR processes sorted in advance, creating reserve support in case services suddenly went into the highest alert levels of emergency.

*"Firefighters will be around incredibly vulnerable people so we had to be sure that enhanced DBS status was met, we had to ensure therefore that the HR teams were aware of the challenges and made sure criteria for exclusion were met."* – Matt England, Collaboration Lead Manager, SECamb

## Enablers of collaboration

### Motivations

- Having a **clear and shared purpose** for collaborating enabled organisations to come together. The pandemic not only provided this purpose, but also meant the usual competing priorities among providers was suspended. Without such competing priorities during the pandemic, Age UK felt collaboration and resource-sharing between would-be competitors became easier and simpler because they were motivated to achieve shared outcomes.

*"Probably in a different situation you would sit down and work out why you want to collaborate, what benefits do we want, how you're going to evaluate and do all these things. Here there was a clear need, instead it became about how can we help, how can we provide support, and then we just cracked on and did it."* – Colin King, Assistant Director for Customer Safety, KFRS

- By **defining goals broadly and focusing on outcomes** it was easier for partners to identify common interests. For example, 'saving lives' or 'improving safety' in the region created the space for collaboration among organisations with different immediate aims.
- Willingness and capability to collaborate were also essential. KFRS noted that it had strong existing relationships with its union, while this was not the case with other fire services. These relationships made it easier to get **buy-in and support** from the union when taking on additional roles with SECamb. In contrast, KFRS noted that other fire services withdrew from collaborations with SECamb due to lack of union support.

### Relationships

- KFRS and Age UK highlighted a shared mentality and motivation in terms of being used to adapting to uncertainty and changing circumstances. They felt **continuing open communication** would allow them to be proactive and make the most of future opportunities for collaboration. This was focused on maintaining their recently established relationships to understand each other's roles rather than formalising collaborative arrangements. They felt this would allow them to remain flexible and adaptive to innovate in times of uncertainty.

**Table 1: Summary of challenges and enablers**

	Challenges for collaboration	Enablers of collaboration
Motivations		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear and shared purpose</li> <li>• Broad definition of goals and focus on outcomes</li> <li>• Buy-in and support</li> </ul>
Structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Competition for funding</li> <li>• Incompatible systems and bureaucracy</li> </ul>	
Relationships		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequent, open communication</li> </ul>

## Lessons learned for collaborative leadership

Organisations felt that working together **broke down outdated or preconceived notions** about what each other's roles entailed, particularly concerning the roles played by the fire service. This allowed managers and leaders to consider new opportunities for collaboration. As a result, both Age UK and SECamb were keen to maintain open dialogue to find new ways to work with KFRS beyond the pandemic.

*“I met some firefighters who work in the KFRS Education Team that provides safety education to schools on water, fire and road safety. It's common sense to think that these roles exist in the fire service but you don't think about them... Once you get to hear about why these people entered these areas you realise there are so many roles the fire service fulfils so why are we not tapping into it?”* – Cleo Smith, Chief Officer, Age UK Ashford

For collaboration between the fire and ambulance services, **national or multi-regional processes** are needed to avoid having to make bespoke arrangements with individual services in different regions. KFRS and SECamb showed it can be done, but issues such as union relationships, contracts, pay and shared training standards need to be established to achieve this efficiently at scale.

When making decisions, it is important to **include or delegate to tactical leads** so practical issues concerning resourcing, staffing, logistics and implementation are taken into account. This also serves to reduce the decision-making burden on executive leaders.

Finally, it is important to recognise that there are **different types of collaboration** that can be tailored to different situations. KFRS and Age UK were keen to maintain an **informal collaborative relationship** to retain individual organisational flexibility, while KFRS and SECamb were keen to adopt an **increasingly formal collaborative relationship** to ensure administrative processes were in place to allow them to respond rapidly and more easily in crisis situations.