

County Council Meeting -11 October 2011

Statement / Updates by Cabinet Members

Madam Chairman I am sorry to have to make this statement to Council but three high profile incidents occurred in 4 days over the last two weeks that have tested Surrey Fire and Rescue Service across the spectrum of its activities. There have been significant fires in two sheltered accommodation premises in Hinchley Wood and Horsell and the industrial units fire in Newchapel, Lingfield. In each case our staff responded quickly and acted with the utmost professionalism to prioritise operations in order to save life, property and limit the impact upon the environment. In addition all emergency services, local boroughs and voluntary agencies rallied round to collectively support the residents and business communities that have been affected.

All three had a significant impact on our communities, required a multi-agency response and drew a wide media interest. We should not forget that sadly one person died and eight people were injured, including one who is still in a critical condition and our thoughts are with their families. The longer-term effects of these incidents will continue to require support from local authorities, agencies, support groups and the local community.

The first fire occurred just after midnight on 30 September in a sheltered accommodation in Gibson Court Hinchley Wood. At its height, the fire and rescue service deployed 14 fire engines, 2 aerial ladder platforms, 2 water carriers and 1 hose layer.

This was a challenging incident as the fire appears to have spread rapidly through the roof requiring responding agencies to cope with both the serious fire situation and trying to account for all of the residents. 22 persons had to be led to safety from inside the building and a further 8 were rescued by the fire service.

County emergency planning officers were informed and worked with Elmbridge Borough Council, who established a rest centre for people who had been evacuated from the building.

The apparent rapid spread of this fire, despite the building being constructed to modern building standards in the mid 1990's, has led to the incident being referred to the Building Research Establishment. Information emerging from the fire and police investigation indicates that the fire started in a television set, the cause and reason for this are a specific area of investigation.

All lines of enquiry will be fully investigated and will be reported to HM Coroner and will be considered as part of an inquest.

The second fire occurred at 05:53 hrs on 1 October in Carlton Road, Horsell, again this involved sheltered accommodation. This time crews faced a fire in a ground floor flat. In total, 3 people were removed to hospital suffering from smoke inhalation, 1 of whom was rescued by the service and a further 19 were evacuated to a local rest centre. In total, 8 fire engines attended the scene. The cause of the fire is believed to be as a result of the disposal of smoking materials.

The final incident, which attracted large-scale media coverage, occurred on Monday 3 October, at 11:22 in the morning involving a serious fire and explosion at Hobb's Industrial Estate, Newchapel near Lingfield. The first crews on scene faced a rapidly developing fire affecting 5 units within one block. The intensity of the fire and the hazards around the building including Liquefied Petroleum Gas tanks and the proximity of other buildings led to the fire service deploying 12 fire engines, 4 water carriers, 1 aerial ladder platform and specialist hazardous material officers to attend the incident.

It became clear very early on that a number of people had been seriously injured, 1 of whom remains in a critical condition. South East Coast Ambulance Service placed their staff on a major incident alert and deployed a number of ambulances, two air ambulances, doctors and their Hazardous Area Response Team (HART) to the scene. Surrey Police deployed investigative teams as well as uniformed officers to secure the site.

This was a significant incident. 8 people had been injured, the building was completely engulfed in fire along with the contents. The fire service worked very hard in difficult conditions both on scene and in logistical terms of securing the water supplies in order to bring the fire under control and finally extinguish it. In doing so they had to consider the environmental impact of the firewater runoff and this necessitated working closely with the Environment Agency to protect the local rivers and the aquatic life.

Surrey Fire and Rescue supported by East and West Sussex Fire and Rescue Services finally brought the fire under control in the early part of the evening. 80% of the building had been destroyed in the fire, a fire which had started in one unit and spread to 4 other businesses.

In common with the previous two fires this one will be the subject of a thorough and extensive investigation by Surrey Police, Surrey Fire and Rescue Service and this time the Health and Safety Executive.

Each of these incidents in its own right was a test of all of the agencies ability to respond and deal with large and complicated incidents. Some of the fire crews attended more than one of these incidents. Dealing with three in such a short space of time has been a significant test of our resources both as individuals and as an organisation. We will continue to work with the three investigations and ultimately we will use any lessons learnt in order to improve the safety of our communities.

As fire service involvement with the incidents recedes and each incident moves into the recovery phase we shouldn't forget those members of the public who have been affected by all three incidents. Our thoughts go out to those people who were injured and killed and their families as they come to terms with the events of the past weeks.

Kay Hammond,
Cabinet Member for Community Safety
11 October 2011