

Wildfire incident at Llantysilio

Summer 2018

The initial call for this incident was received at the Joint Communication Centre, St Asaph at 14:20 on the 19th July 2018, and operations formally came to a close at 13.45 on the 25th September 2018.

During those 68 days, 328 appliance mobilisations were made along with 135 officer mobilisations. Appliances from as far away as Aberdyfi in the South of Gwynedd and Amlwch on the North of Anglesey attended.

The estimated total area burnt was 9 square kilometres.

Throughout the incident North Wales Fire and Rescue Service regularly liaised with a number of partners including:

- North Wales Police
- Welsh Ambulance Service NHS Trust
- Natural Resources Wales
- Denbighshire Countryside Service
- Denbighshire County Council Highways
- Hafren Dyfrdwy
- Severn Trent Water

Terrain and access to the vast geography in order to apply water posed a challenge and the dense heath, gorse and bracken, with a deep layer of decomposed vegetation beneath, resulted in there being significant fuel to propagate fire spread more than 1.5 metres below the surface.

In places, the ground appeared to provide hard standing but in fact the undergrowth covered undulations and void spaces in the land, which made driving conditions and access very difficult for all vehicles. In addition, following burning, these areas were obscured by a significant depth of ash, varying from a few centimetres in some places, to half a metre in others.

The unpredictable nature of the terrain posed significant health and safety implications for all, both when attempting to drive and even when walking around the incident ground.

Travel on foot to the scene of operations whilst carrying equipment over considerable distances was made even more difficult because of the unprecedented hot weather throughout most of the period. Some of the other challenges included:

- Water Supplies – initially the hydrant on site was being automatically and remotely turned off due to the system interpreting a catastrophic failure of the water main. This was overcome in partnership with the water companies who provided water bowsers

- Large volumes of smoke – Smoke levels were very much dependent upon wind direction and areas where fires would break through from underground to the surface. As a result there was a need to open and close roads at various times throughout the incident.
- Fire Breaks – Prior to the fire, the area had not benefited from robust land management as a result fire breaks were limited. As the incident developed, offers of help to cut fire breaks were balanced against the hazards and risks that presented on site. Where fire breaks were cut they were done as part of a planned approach and with the approval of Natural Resources Wales.
- Equipment – It was difficult to get vehicles to the far extremities of the site due to unsafe terrain and crumbling tracks. The Service did suffer damage to appliances whilst attempting to firefight in these areas. This resulted in all firefighting activities requiring to be carried out on foot and whilst manually carrying the equipment necessary to do so. It is not to be underestimated how much physical effort was required to do this and NWFRS crews are to be commended for their efforts.
- Relief of crews – The predominant number of firefighters in North Wales operate on an 'on call' basis. They usually have primary employment and employers across the region were very understanding of the need for these crew members to be away from their workplaces in order to fight wildfires. However, others did need to be relieved in order to attend primary employment and this coupled with the need to replace those who had been working hard for many hours presented challenges because of the protracted nature of this particular incident.
- Media messages – There was a significant amount of incorrect information reported in the media and this only added to the frustrations that were presented by the local communities. There was a joined up approach taken to communication with regular contact between the press offices from NWFRS, NRW and Denbighshire county council, but the perspective presented, particularly in print media was unhelpful.

Both an internal and external debriefs were undertaken following this incident and a number of areas of both single agency and multi-agency learning recommendations have been identified. From a NWFRS single agency perspective the six main areas of focus for our internal learning in relation to all wildfires across the summer period include:

- Incident command and control and the need for consistency across all levels of command;
- Command support and the need for systems to be standardised so as to better support the decision making of the incident commander;
- Resources, in particular vehicles, and the need to review their capability/capacity to support and enable the effective resolution of wildfires;
- The need to provide suitable and sufficient welfare facilities for staff during protracted incidents;
- The benefits of joint working and the application of the Joint Emergency Service Interoperability Principles (JESIP);
- The benefits of the proactive management of staff availability and how this impacted on the operational response and resolution of fires, staff; their families and, in the case of retained members of staff, their main employers.

