

Report to the special meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Committee,

20 March 2019

Appendix relating to the response and interaction with Denbighshire County Council

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Highways Response

Highways' first input into the fire and its associated issues came late in the afternoon of Friday July 27th 2018 via a request from Countryside Services colleagues for a flail mower to cut back bracken at the edge of the carriageway on the Horseshoe Pass. Fortunately we had a contractor in the Denbigh area at the time and we were able to divert him to the scene.

Overnight and into the Saturday conditions worsened as the fire (and associated smoke) got closer to the main road and we were requested to put in a road closure so cones were put out and some rudimentary signing put in place. Again this request had come via Countryside Services staff who were our only liaison point with the Fire Service.

During the day, and more especially into the evening, conditions worsened as the fire approached the Ponderosa and we were asked to 'beef up' the closure by putting in manned control points as people were still choosing to drive through the area. Considerable effort was put into making these arrangements but when we finally had operatives in place we were then informed that North Wales Police had found the resources to be able to man the closure themselves so we stood down our crews.

On the Sunday conditions had eased a little but the Fire Service still wanted a closure in place and manning it in the longer term was going to be unfeasible and, with just a few cones in place it was clear that road users would continue to abuse this and try to use the road thus putting themselves and fire service personnel in jeopardy as they were working off the carriageway in what was sometimes almost zero visibility due to the smoke. As a result we opted to collect water filled barriers from our depot and to deploy these to give a robust, physical deterrent with better defined signing too.

In subsequent days, and depending on conditions, we deployed a combination of this physical barrier arrangement or single lane traffic control – which was mainly there to give a protection zone to fire personnel who were still having to work off the carriageway below the top layby.

Over time, pressure grew from businesses in the vicinity and in Llangollen itself to get the road open and it was difficult for us to communicate (via our normal processes) what was happening.

Finally, around the 20th August the area was declared safe and we were able to remove all restrictions.

Issues and Difficulties.

As a department we are extremely used to both dealing with and managing emergency incidents involving the highway. In the past, during large scale events, our response has been in conjunction with North Wales Police (NWP) and invariably this has included on site liaison between officers from both us and NWP. On other occasions, such as widespread snow conditions we take control and follow set procedures and guidelines. In the case of the fire this proved almost impossible to achieve.

In the first few days of the incident there was almost no direct contact between the lead officer from highways and the Fire Service Incident Control officer. On occasion Highways would phone the main control room at Rhyl Fire Station and be told who the on-site Officer was and their contact number would be provided but there was no handover at the end of the shift so continuity was very difficult to maintain. If it hadn't been for the on-site presence of colleagues in Countryside Services then it is unlikely that the response from Highways would have been anywhere near adequate.

About a week after the start of the fire a Command Post was set up in a layby and more formal meetings began to take place which enabled better planning, co-ordination and communication but until then it was very disjointed and difficult for us to be engaged properly.

Lessons Learned

As stated above, we are very used to dealing with incidents involving the highway and the need for managing traffic but this was different, possibly because a formal Tactical Coordinating Group was not established which would have aided communication and insight.

In a multi –agency de-brief that followed the incident we explained what resources we had available to us and North Wales Fire and Rescue Service were genuinely surprised how limited we were. The reason for their surprise was that they have seen we have been able to do in other circumstances such as flooding so they were under the impression that we could draw on a lot of help. The truth is not quite the same. In the winter we are geared up for long periods of bad weather and a substantial on call system with additional back up is put in place. In the summer this does not exist but if there is a forecast of bad weather such as thunderstorms and potential flooding then we do make ad-hoc short term arrangements. Normally there are only two out of hours operatives available to assist with small scale incidents. The crux here is that these events can be forecast – the fire was completely different.

One good outcome from the lessons learned is that there is now a greater understanding of mutual capability and what is and isn't achievable.

For us too there is always the duty we have to get roads open as soon as possible. Pressure builds on us when they remain closed for longer than the general public would perceive as necessary and irrespective of the underlying reason for the closure, the need to either open the road or explain the reasons for its ongoing closure builds. In this case there was the balance to be made between ensuring the safety of Fire Service personnel whilst also trying to keep traffic flowing – not least because up here the alternative routes for some vehicles is excessively long via Corwen. At times this onus on us as the Highway Authority seemed to get lost and there were frustrations due to us not being able to state what was going on or was foreseeably going to happen. This needs addressing in any future, similar event.