

## **Written evidence submitted by Professor Paresh Wankhade (COR0135)**

Sub theme: The preparedness of forces to support Local Resilience Forums during a possible civil contingency emergency

Introduction to organisation and reason to submit evidence.

[Paresh Wankhade](#) is a Professor of Leadership and Management at Edge Hill University, UK. He has a known expertise in the field of emergency services management. He is the Programme leader for the UK's first bespoke Professional Doctorate in Emergency Services Management. He is the Editor-In-Chief of International Journal of Emergency Services. He has published widely in top academic journals and professional publications on strategic leadership, organisational culture, organisational change and interoperability between the emergency services. He works closely with blue light professionals in co-production of new knowledge. He has the expertise and genuine research interest to submit the following evidence.

### **Evidence**

The coronavirus outbreak is having a profound impact on our personal and work lives. Its implications for our already under-pressure<sup>1</sup> emergency services are quite significant. Since the pandemic has grown, there has been greater burden on the emergency first responders to respond appropriately and safely. In this written evidence, I highlight four key challenges for the forces which are likely to impact on their preparedness to support Local Resilience Forums.

#### 1. Unresolved Funding crisis

Emergency services have witnessed massive reductions in their budgets over the past ten years which have impacted the response and service delivery of these organisations. In case of police forces, there has been a fall of 30% in real terms in the funding from the Central Government<sup>2</sup>. While the recent announcement by the Government to recruit additional 20,000 police officers is a welcome step, it is far from clear whether this would mean new posts or will just bring the staffing levels back to pre-2010 levels<sup>3</sup>. The National Audit Office in its last report also highlighted concerns about the financial sustainability of the fire and rescue services<sup>4</sup>. The Fire Brigade Union (FBU) has been quite vocal in its criticism of the loss of central funding to the tune of 30% (from 2013-14) in the latest settlement for 2020-21<sup>5</sup>. Likewise, the NHS ambulance services have seen a year-on increase in the 999 demand without being matched by additional resources<sup>6</sup>. The current pandemic has put additional constraints on the services and my work has highlighted some of the challenges being faced by emergency services even during normal situation<sup>7-8</sup>. This

has remained a highly emotive and contentious issue between service leaders and the Government.

## 2. Dealing with sickness absence and safety of crews

Maintaining adequate staffing levels will have a massive bearing while supporting local resilience forums and will remain as one of the key challenges facing the forces. Sickness absence (highest amongst NHS ambulance workers) has been on rise in emergency services which has been well documented in the literature<sup>9</sup>. The current crisis has prompted calls from service chiefs to request services for retired and former colleagues to help dealing the COVID-19 situation. This has resulted in fire and rescue staff volunteering to help police and ambulance services to perform a variety of roles. Similarly, individual organisations will have to ensure the availability of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE to emergency first responders in their fight against coronavirus as the disease spreads. Such concerns, which are regularly highlighted in the media,<sup>10</sup> will require to be addressed urgently to ensure that frontline staff are not dealing with suspected cases in the community (due to lack of testing) without appropriate PPE and gear. As the pandemic situation unfolds over the next few months, this will be crucial to maintain organisational resilience and strategic capability till the current crisis reaches manageable levels.

## 3. Supporting mental health and wellbeing of staff

Supporting psychological wellbeing has emerged as a key challenge facing emergency services staff during the current pandemic. How the current situation is contributing to higher stress levels for frontline workers has been well covered in the media and also highlighted for emergency services<sup>11</sup>. Media has also reported emotional stories of frontline crews affected by the emotional trauma of dealing with COVID-19 patients and coping with illness and death of fellow colleagues<sup>12</sup>. Providing organisational support and helping the workforce in prioritising their social and psychological support will require collective efforts of different agencies<sup>13-14</sup>.

## 4. Maintaining organisational and strategic capability

The crisis demands constant monitoring of the situation to maintain appropriate response capabilities (tactical and strategic) and ensuring acceptable level of service while still dealing with reduced staffing levels. The current crisis is likely to impact on making difficult decisions to divert resources or even cut back some services to prioritise the response to the coronavirus and dealing with vulnerable people or domestic abuse victims while still dealing with other existential threats. Ensuring the lockdown has resulted in additional responsibility for police forces who were criticised for being 'overzealous', especially during the early period of the lockdown<sup>15</sup>. Notwithstanding the 'coordination' challenges highlighted in the literature<sup>16</sup> or by the findings of recent public inquiries dealing with the response of emergency services

to major incidents<sup>17</sup>, the current crisis has exhibited greater cooperation between different organisations in the backdrop of organisational and cultural issues.

## Conclusion

Emergency services are facing one of the biggest challenges in dealing with COVID-19 situation but their response during the current pandemic has been exemplary. However, as my analysis suggests, there are real challenges facing the emergency services which is likely to impact their preparedness to support the Local Resilience Forums. Service chiefs will need to support their staff with empathy and compassion. Acting with urgency, communicating with clarity and responding productively to the mistakes has been recently argued<sup>18</sup> as 'virtues of good leadership' during this pandemic.

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