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FIRE Comment

As the Coronavirus pandemic sweeps the world, FIRE Editor **Andrew Lynch** outlines the key elements required to transform our approach in his white paper, *Coronavirus: A Five-Step Reset for Fire and Emergency Leaders*



A new architecture for society

‘We must prepare for this random disorder, accept our society has changed irreparably, but do all we can to mitigate the impact’. These are not the words of a minister advising the nation but, surprisingly, my own taken from the October 2001 issue of *FIRE*, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

In the current crisis – which is nothing short of a global calamity – focussing on short-term objectives is a live-saving priority. As we are becoming increasingly aware, it involves keeping the virus at bay so our NHS can cope; a strategy repeated across the world with equivalent health services, even as thousands die daily. But the medium and long-term consequences should be assessed simultaneously by political and public service leaders.

I propose leaders work towards establishing a clearly defined approach for addressing the five steps outlined below within their organisations, while also adopting a cross-sector, cross-disciplinary mindset. This calls for a total reset to recondition our way of thinking towards protecting society.

In the immediate aftermath of the UK government’s stringent restrictions on movement, *FIRE*’s Security Correspondent

Dr Sloggett told me that the outcome would likely be a “new architecture for society”. It is this phrase that frames the following observations and recommendations: a five-step reset to reorganise society to meet the demands of a post-Covid-19 world.

Five-Step Reset

1) Resetting the Ecosystem

The global impact of climate change is upon us, as the recent prelude of nationwide flooding only served to underline further for those not getting the message. As Dr Sloggett writes in the next issue of *FIRE*: ‘Climate change, irrespective of the tedious arguments that are made by those who deny its reality by suggesting that this is another cycle which will pass, are simply living in a parallel universe’. It is clear that more needs to be done to address the increasingly devastating effect of environmental pollution – the growing ‘unintended consequences’ list has barely been explored, never mind debated on a national level.

Livestock farming, with the vast resources of rain forests expunged to feed livestock, is rapidly becoming the world’s greatest single polluter. The unintended consequences of livestock requiring incredible levels of natural resources leads to dwindling water supplies,

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“The ‘tip of the iceberg’ events – from devastating country-wide flooding and wildfires to global pandemics – has become the new normal”

massive grain consumption and waste polluting streams, rivers and oceans. That’s before we get to methane and the overuse of antibiotics to control diseases in factory farms and the consequential resistance humans are building to antibiotics.

As overpopulation and livestock farming force populations into wildland territories, our impact on biodiversity is becoming clear as wildlife and humans interact at unnaturally close quarters. The ‘wet market’ (the sale of live meat and fish) in Wuhan, China, where a variety of animals were displayed in unsanitary conditions, is the likely ‘ground zero’ for Coronavirus. Scientists at Wuhan University, of all places, have long predicted that a global pandemic was inevitable, less a matter of ‘not if but when’ rather ‘not one but how many’ – a frightening thought in dark times.

The ‘tip of the iceberg’ events – from devastating country-wide flooding and wildfires to global pandemics – has become the new normal. So, what happens when matters get even worse? When global temperature rises cause harvest failures, food shortages and famine?

Today’s leaders must recognise a world in rapid decline due to our impact on the environment, acknowledge the devastation we have reaped and resolve to lead in every way possible to mitigate future impact. There can be no equivocation in recognising the inevitable to recommend the most stringent response that we all need to take, such as bringing forward the deployment of electric cars. There should be no more excuses around ‘unintended consequences’ – the whole ecosystem is connected, and we must join the dots to understand the situation and remedy behaviour.

Leaders must educate themselves on every aspect of environmental impact, even the most unpalatable, to take the necessary steps to guide the public to make difficult choices. Quite simply, a step change is required. Could the pandemic be the first step to ‘resetting’ how society functions?

2) Resetting Fire and Rescue

The frontline response to the pandemic, headed by NHS workers and supported by emergency and public sector services

has focused attention on the resourcefulness of our healthcare workers, while highlighting the fragility of the system as peak crisis rapidly approaches.

As a fundamental component of the public safety ecosystem, the Fire and Rescue Service has in one sense a unique capability – that of responding swiftly and effectively to fires and emergencies – acknowledged as on the whole being fit for purpose in HMI’s State of Fire report. But other aspects of function and service delivery need to be re-addressed in the wake of the pandemic, not least the supportive role to other frontline service deliverers in times of crisis.

You may recall that the Knight Report in 2013 advocated closer working with the Ambulance Service as well as Police and but for Home Office priorities we could have travelled further in that direction. While several fire and rescue services have moved towards closer collaboration and support, the next step change is required in how public services operate together, both effectively, and importantly as budgets contract in the coming months and years, efficiently.

A realignment in how fire and rescue services operate, deliver services and collaborate should be considered now, as the attention centres on the NHS and away from fire and rescue. ‘The day when the word ‘Fire’ is removed from the title of the ‘Service’ cannot be far away’, our correspondent states and he might not be far wrong.

3) Resetting Dynamic Leaders

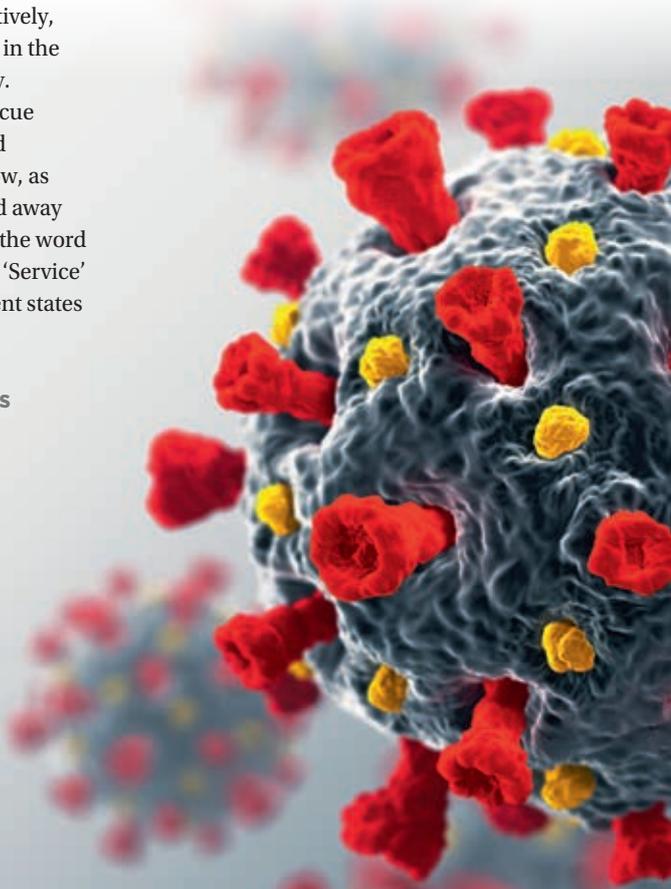
If realignment is required, then visionary leaders need to show the way. Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Fire and Rescue Services, Sir Tom Winsor, finds some aspect of FRS leadership inadequate, especially regarding diversity, as he states in the State of Fire report: ‘All too often we have found senior management teams being an echo chamber for people who sound and think the same’.

In the February issue of *FIRE*, the Asian Fire Service Association’s Jagtar Singh and



Wayne McCollin espoused considering a range of leadership styles, from transactional to transformational, while stressing the importance of trust. ‘The effective leader must be authentic, inclusive, value driven, honest, open and transparent’ they state and go on to commend generative leadership above all else by saying: ‘Generative leadership invites senior leaders to show vulnerability and empower key stakeholders to self-organise and to find the solution to complex issues.’

While transactional or autocratic leadership styles may be required at present in dealing with the crisis, a more dynamic approach will become increasingly crucial in



future, incorporating a variety of styles for an entirely different society. The world is tilting on its axis and leaders should be able to shift their perspectives to incorporate a broader world view – an integral approach – and take their colleagues with them.

The new architecture of society calls for a more dynamic, proactive style of leadership, unafraid to tell harsh truths to politicians and citizens alike to place protection on the front foot rather than the afterthought it had become in what was until recently a complacent society.

4) Resetting Resilient Communities

An ever-evolving cycle had begun the moment government announced restrictions on movement and while the worst excesses by the less considerate elements of society take hold of too much of the media airtime – adding unnecessarily to many people’s angst – a growing movement by the silent majority is taking hold. That is one of family, group and community resilience. Given the restrictions of movement, communities are coming together virtually to protect the most vulnerable in supplying essentials, with an emerging NHS volunteer army.

Following the widespread flooding across the UK it was warming to discover a research wildfire drill project in the Austin Travis County region of Texas, with a population of 1.4 million residents which ranks fifth in US wildfire risk (see pg 38). The research findings from the drill by the University of Texas found that people who were more involved in the community association, and those who felt social pressures to prepare for fires, were more prepared. Researchers found that there seems to be more to preparedness than simply getting individuals to act. There was a collective sense that preparedness is important for this community.

This approach seemed relevant in the wake of recent widespread flooding and now seems even more apposite amid Coronavirus.

The government recently kicked off a scheme to recruit a volunteer army of 250,000 people to support the NHS – which quickly reached half a million plus as *FIRE* went to press – a precursor to a new sensibility and regard for community resilience. The idea is to assist vulnerable members of the community in providing essential support such as delivering medical provisions and transporting them to hospital. In sunnier times it recalls the 70,000 volunteers for the 2012 London Olympics – the Games Makers – who helped create a fun, communal atmosphere.

Although the circumstances are entirely different, key elements of pride in taking community action, helping others and



“The new architecture of society calls for a more dynamic, proactive style of leadership, unafraid to tell harsh truths to politicians and citizens alike”

creating a sense of ‘being in it all together’ should not be underestimated. How can this volunteer army approach be harnessed to face future challenges, next time before the horse has bolted?

5) Resetting Connected Communities

Staying connected has never been more crucial: from supporting vulnerable and isolated members of the community to the importance of clarity of messaging from public services and government, the power of effective communications has come under intense scrutiny.

At the heart of this is how do we help each other? How do we safeguard the most vulnerable people in our communities? How do we ensure we follow guidelines? How do we act safely to protect ourselves and loved ones?

In the near future, the previous four resets should help us answer questions of how do

we prepare for the next pandemic? What provisions do we put in place now, nationally, regionally and locally to mitigate the next disaster, whether disease, terrorism, flood or famine? How do we stay connected to become a more resilient society?

If you think this is too soon to consider the next major incident amid the carnage of this one, reflect on how you felt when you first heard of the outbreak in Wuhan just a few months ago? Or Ebola, SARS? All of which struck on other continents but they might have been on other worlds.

If one positive comes from the Coronavirus let it be that we are better prepared to reduce the loss of life in the inevitable event of future catastrophes by being well informed, staying connected and proactive. It will require a step change, a complete reset of how we approach life, but that it is the only way of mitigating impact in this new architecture for society.