



## COVID-19 Information Note: Responding to student halls of residence

There is evidence of increased infection rates within student halls of residence in the UK. Only recently, 1000 students and staff at the University of Nottingham and University of Sheffield have been forced to self-isolate after testing positive for coronavirus. Against this background of increasing risk of COVID-19 infection within campus, there is a need to review FRS response specifically to student halls of residence for events such as activation of fire alarms.

This guidance outlines considerations for frontline Firefighters who are called to student halls of residence **and** builds upon the 'COVID-19: guidance for first responder' published by Public Health England (updated 22 September 2020)<sup>1</sup> and the associated PPE guidance for firefighters and frontline staff published by the NFCC dated 9 April 2020.<sup>2</sup>

### Definition: student halls of residence

Whilst the focus of this guidance is on student halls of residence, this guidance also applies to any accommodation that contains large numbers of people who have been requested to self-isolate due to a confirmed outbreak of COVID-19.

### Activities and scope

This guidance is applicable to all frontline firefighters and frontline staff who may be required to attend student halls of residence or other similar type premises where an outbreak of COVID-19 is known, may reasonably be anticipated or, where mass student or resident's isolation and or lockdown measures are in place as a result of COVID-19.

This includes:

1. Responding to fire alarms or other alert system calls;
2. Responding to any other calls from other sources where a FRS attendance is required

\*Note: Where there is a known fire in a premises or a fire is discovered on arrival, standard firefighting PPE must be worn and equipment and procedures adopted as per each Services extant position.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-interim-guidance-for-first-responders>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.nationalfirechiefs.org.uk/write/MediaUploads/COVID-19/Health%20safety/COVID19\\_PPE\\_firefighters\\_frontline\\_staff\\_FINAL\\_V2.pdf](https://www.nationalfirechiefs.org.uk/write/MediaUploads/COVID-19/Health%20safety/COVID19_PPE_firefighters_frontline_staff_FINAL_V2.pdf)

## Minimum recommended PPE requirements

The NFCC COVID-19 – PPE guidance for firefighters and frontline staff <sup>3</sup> should be referred to as it sets out a range of potential scenarios and the minimum level of PPE that firefighters and frontline staff should don.

However, Services may wish to consider the level of PPE necessary to safely resolve the issue particularly given the heightened levels of transmission in student accommodation currently being witnessed and the large numbers people who may be unfamiliar with their surroundings who would require evacuation. It is understood this this may be a temporary arrangement based on local lockdown measures.

As such, the following PPE (or elements of it) may be an additional consideration for those attending a student halls of residence or similar premises where they are required to leave the appliance.

- Nitrile gloves
- \*FFP3 mask / please see note below
- \*\*Eye protection as a minimum: where a fire helmet is worn and visor is available, consideration should be given to having it in the down position.
- Fire kit\*\*, or fluid resistant coverall suit / apron.

\*\*consider decontamination after use subject to intervention made.

### \* Additional considerations in relation to PPE guidance and advice

PHE guidance advises that an IIR type fluid resistant mask is recommended for use by firefighters and frontline responders in most circumstances.

However, if the FRS were to respond to an alarm call at a student's halls of residence, and social distancing would not be possible as crowds or those evacuating are moving randomly during these events, the viral load of a 'locked down' accommodation block would be high, in this circumstance the risk to firefighters may be mitigated further through the use of the PPE identified above.

## Hierarchy of control

In addition to the level of PPE to be worn, FRS should consider applying a hierarchy of control in relation to potential exposure of staff to COVID-19 as a result of attendance at student halls of residence or other such premises.

Where attendance is unavoidable, the principles of maintaining at least 2 meters distance from others and employing a high standard of face, mouth, eye, hand cleanliness and protection are paramount.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.nationalfirechiefs.org.uk/write/MediaUploads/COVID-19/Health%20safety/COVID19\\_PPE\\_firefighters\\_frontline\\_staff\\_FINAL\\_V2.pdf](https://www.nationalfirechiefs.org.uk/write/MediaUploads/COVID-19/Health%20safety/COVID19_PPE_firefighters_frontline_staff_FINAL_V2.pdf)

Building on FRS existing procedures and PPE guidance, we recommend that the following matters should be explored locally:

- Is it possible to obtain site specific risk information from site owners via crews of protection teams regarding the status of each building or premises in relation to COVID-19 to have available to Fire Controls and crews ahead of any call?
- Does the student accommodation have onsite staff who may be able to investigate the initial alarm and assist in coordinating initial actions?
- Is it possible to establish a timely line of data and communication between premises owners / responsible persons to advise FRS where outbreaks occur, isolation and lockdown are being implemented in near live time?
- Are premises heat charts available from site owners indicating the identified or anticipated density or extent of any COVID-19 outbreak, lockdown or isolation?
- Can premises owners identify an assembly point for those whom may evacuate the premises away from the location where the FRS will attend if this is not already the case?
- Where more than one appliance or vehicle is mobilised, can a temporary RVP be identified near to each premises for oncoming vehicles and crews until the initial attending resource has established whether additional resources are required?
- On arrival at a premises, can the number of people entering the premises or interacting with the public be minimised?
- If the crew remain with the appliance rather than entering the premises they should get off the vehicle to ensure air is circulated and refreshed within the vehicle prior to commencing any return trip.
- Is it possible to restrict the number of staff who may respond to any call to student accommodation or similar premises to minimise potential exposure of staff?

## **Additional considerations**

The PPE and details contained within this guidance are in accordance with published guidance by PHE and the NFCC and should be considered as the minimum for staff attending student halls of residence or similar premises. Each Service will have its own processes and procedures for assessing risks to staff and the process of dynamic risk assessment should be employed by firefighters and frontline staff on each occasion that they are mobilised.

It is recognised that some services may choose to substitute recommended PPE for other equal or higher standard of PPE to meet local needs or desire.

Where a fire is confirmed or reasonably suspected and following the gathering of information and application of the risk assessment process, the incident commander should adopt the standard of PPE that each service specifies for such activity.

NFCC acknowledges that some services may wish to default to an alternative level of protection on occasion, again subject to a suitable and sufficient risk assessment.