

Fire Focus: Fire fighting in the public arena – a holistic approach

On Friday 17 April 2015, Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service (OFRS) was called to a roof fire at the Macdonald Randolph hotel in Oxford city centre. The hotel is an internationally recognised icon of Oxford, regularly used in both the Morse and Lewis TV series, and is commonly frequented by dignitaries and celebrities.



Photo: Oxford Times

The customers on the roof terrace restaurant opposite the hotel tweeted images throughout the incident, all of which promoted the actions of the crews. These were re-tweeted by a series of OCC media profiles and throughout the county to warn and inform commuters, public services and the general public of the incident, road closures and the associated diversions.

Public service integration

The fire at the Randolph hotel had the potential to make a drama out of a crisis. However, the cohesive team of the Oxfordshire County Council departments ensured this didn't happen. From the timely and heroic actions of the fire crew, supported by their comprehensive incident command training, the appropriate actions occurred, which minimised the fire spread and subsequent damage. The integration of the public services, the communication of the road closures to bus companies and the use of electronic traffic signs warned the public of the potential disruption. The emergency planning department supported the displaced individuals and enabled them to make the best out of the situation, and crucially the communication of the incident by the county council media team maintained a consistent and accurate account of the incident.

The fire and rescue service no longer works in isolation, and is now part of a much wider incident response package.

A good job was done by all, the profile of the fire service was raised and the county council was portrayed in a positive light, well done.

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Photo: Oxford Times

The fire started in the kitchen on the ground floor of the hotel, and quickly spread through the extraction system to a flat roof and tower behind the distinctive facade of the building. The fire service attendance reached 12 appliances and three aerial platforms from three services at its height, and was supported by the police, ambulance service, HART and the county council services.

As with many iconic buildings situated in historic cities, access to the fire was a significant problem. Over the last century the city has built up around the hotel, vastly restricting the access to the rear of the building. It was only the exemplary topographic knowledge of local crews that facilitated alternative routes being accessed through adjacent premises, providing access to the seat of the fire. The prompt actions of the initial crews, the timely make-up and quick attendance times of the initial appliances all significantly contributed to saving this historic building. With the damage limited to just a small area of the hotel, it had partially re-opened within a week of the fire; however the actions of the fire service weren't just limited to extinguishing the fire.

Public image

In an era of budget cuts, cohesive emergency services, integrated county councils and instantaneous global media outlets, the role of the fire service is as much about extinguishing the fire as preserving our public image. There were a large number

of high profile guests staying in the hotel, a bride and her bridesmaids in the spa at the time of the fire, guests with flights to catch and business meetings to attend. Local businesses were also eager to maintain 'business as usual' as soon as the dynamic phase of the incident was complete. Through good communication and integrated working, the adjacent theatre maintained its scheduled evening performance and the Ashmolean museum opposite remained open throughout.

The integration of the fire service within Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) enables a ready alignment of other key services during an emergency. The emergency planning department attended the scene and remained on site throughout the incident. They were instrumental in ensuring the guests had been accommodated elsewhere and then utilised fire crews for locating essential guest medication, passport return and the important retrieval of a wedding dress.

Media role

This was a significant incident for OFRS and had the potential to cause major disruption throughout the city and impact the wider community, but there was little disruption. The key difference of this incident compared to others in recent years, is the role of the media, and this integration of all the public services within the county. The fire was streamed 'live' throughout the incident through the Oxford Town Centre webcam, which was then tweeted and linked to news websites and blogs around the world.



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