

Priti Patel thanks firefighters for tireless efforts during coronavirus

Home Secretary Priti Patel paid tribute to the work of firefighters throughout the coronavirus pandemic as she visited Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service today (Thursday 6 August).

She met with firefighters who have been on the frontlines during the pandemic and heard how their roles have adapted to deal with the challenges posed by coronavirus.

Throughout the pandemic, FRS staff have taken on a range of additional duties to support the national effort to fight coronavirus.

This has included delivering essential items to over 80,000 vulnerable people, fitting over 4,000 face masks for frontline NHS and care staff, and transporting over 3,000 non-COVID-19 patients to and from hospital, according to statistics collected by the National Fire Chiefs' Council.

Home Secretary Priti Patel said:

Our brave firefighters have played a crucial part in our fight against coronavirus.

They have provided invaluable support to other emergency services – assisting vulnerable people and NHS staff – in addition to their usual life-saving duties.

I am extremely grateful to them for their selfless service to our country.

During her visit, the home secretary was briefed on Merseyside's role in coordinating national resilience capabilities for fire and rescue services across England and Wales.

Merseyside FRS provides specialist training to other fire authorities and maintains specialist vehicles and kit required to protect people and property in local and national emergencies. The Home Office is providing over £11 million in total funding for Merseyside's role in national resilience work.

Her visit included a demonstration of how firefighters use high-volume pumps – which can pump 7,000 litres of water per minute – to respond to major flooding incidents, such as the Whaley Bridge dam breach in August 2019.

She also met with the urban search and rescue team to see how fire dogs are used to locate missing people following natural disasters and building collapses.

Merseyside FRS Chief Fire Officer Phil Garrigan said:

It is fantastic to have the opportunity to show the Home Secretary some of the work we do here at Merseyside – both in our own right as a local Fire & Rescue Service but also as part of our national role in relation to the coordination and deployment of National Fire and Rescue Service assets.

We have also been able to show how we have maintained our operational responsibilities despite the current pandemic and despite concurrent events taking place elsewhere. For example, the Home Secretary was able to see first-hand how we are currently preparing our teams should they be needed to aid in the response to the terrible events in Beirut this week as part of the UK International Search and Rescue team.

Throughout the pandemic, Fire & Rescue Services up and down the country have gone above and beyond the call of duty, helping to support our NHS and blue light colleagues wherever possible.

The way in which operational and non-operational staff have stepped up during this crisis is incredible but not in the least bit surprising. Locally, Merseyside FRS staff have delivered thousands of prescription medications and hundreds of food parcels to those most in need. We have worked with our local authority partners, housing associations, charities and sports teams to ensure that those most at risk have not been forgotten.

We've continued our day to day work alongside these additional roles. We train for all scenarios, but could not have coped so well without our incredible staff. I'm very proud of them and we will continue to do everything we can to support our frontline workers and amazing NHS colleagues.

To support the fire and rescue service during the pandemic, the Home Office recently launched a £6 million Fire COVID-19 Contingency Fund. This fund will provide financial support to fire and rescue authorities who incur significant costs as a result of taking on additional duties during the pandemic.

The government has also provided £3.7 billion to local government to support their response to the outbreak. This included around £35 million for standalone fire and rescue authorities. County councils and unitary authorities with responsibilities for fire also received a share of the funding as part of a wider allocation that reflects the totality of their local government responsibilities.